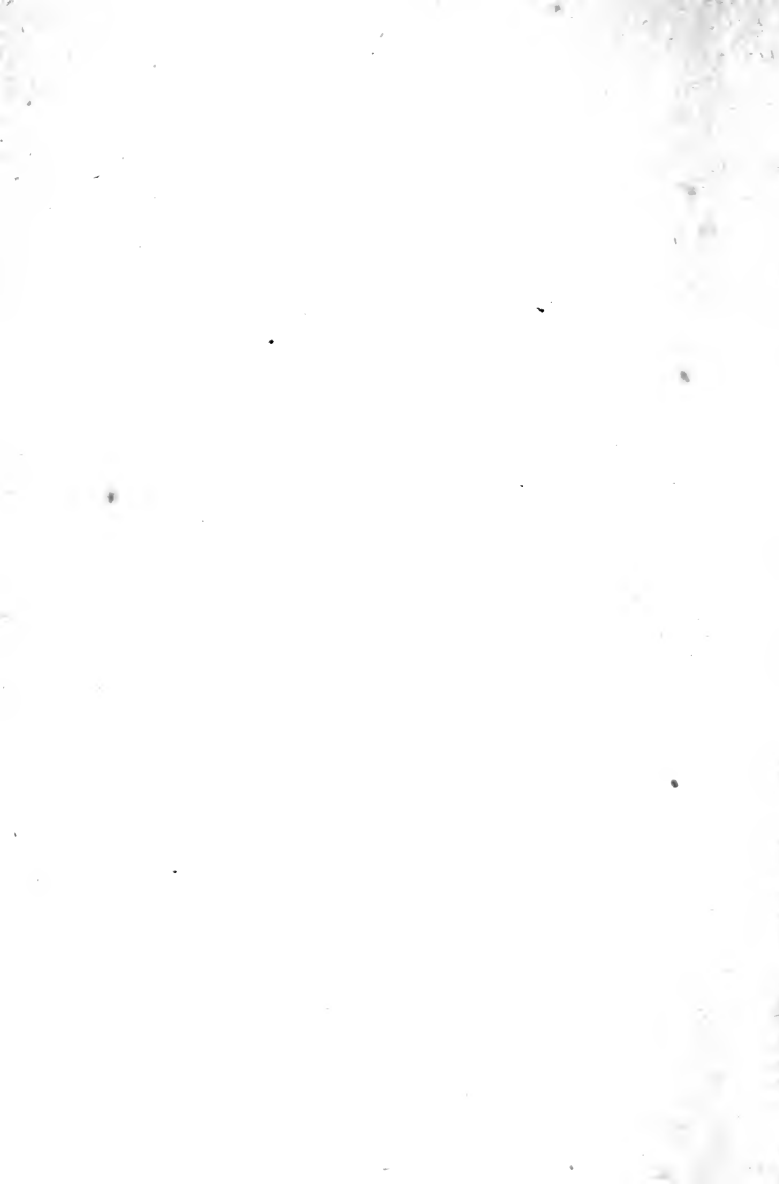




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ALICE GODOLPHIN

AND

A LITTLE HEIRESS.

Two Stories.

BY

MARY NEVILLE.

Mary Neville
IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

Purpureus veluti cum flos succisus aratro
Languescit moriens ; lassove papavera collo
Demisere caput, pluviâ cum fortè gravantur.

ÆNEID, BOOK IX.

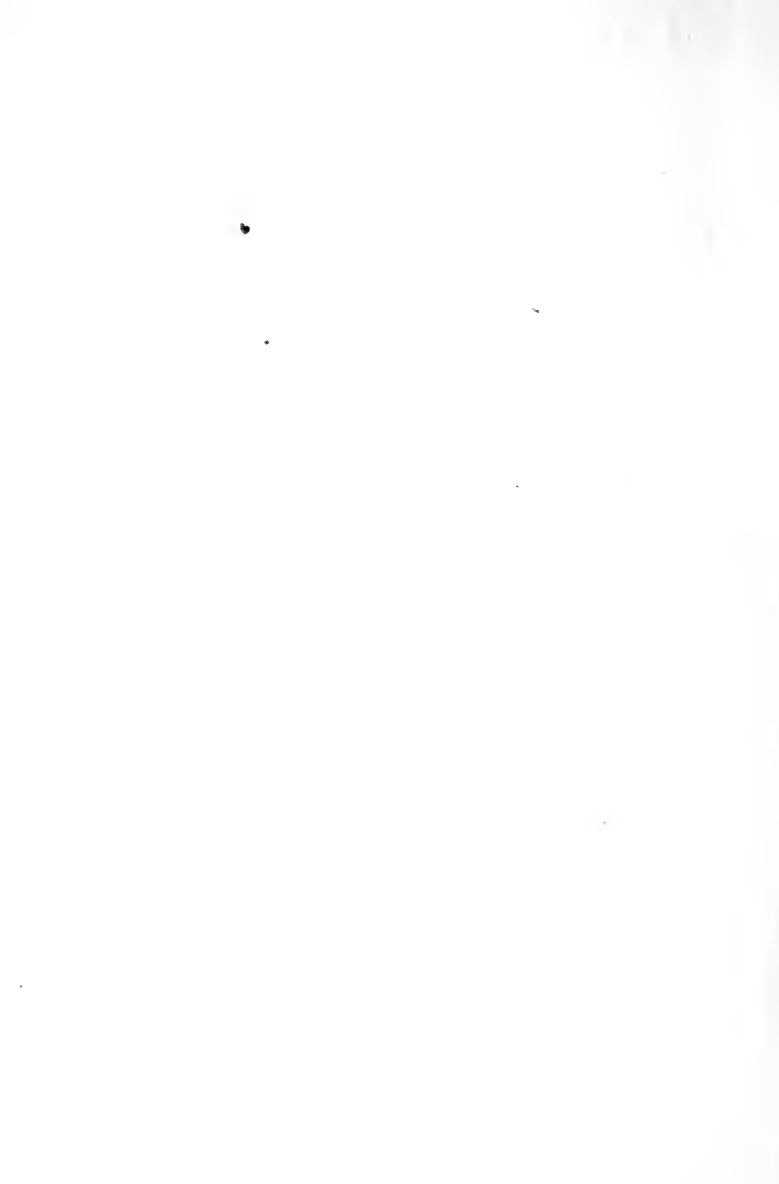


London :

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v. 2

A LITTLE HEIRESS.

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A LITTLE HEIRESS.

CHAPTER III.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

Meek souls there are, who little dream
Their daily life an angel's theme ;
Or that the rod they take so calm
Shall prove in Heaven a martyr's crown.

KEBLE.

MY seventeenth birthday fell upon a warm, lovely day in August ; and I rose in the morning with a sense of exhilaration, caused partly by the first fine weather after a fortnight's incessant rain, and partly by the consciousness that I had now attained (in my aunt's opinion) to years of discretion, and was entitled to consider myself fairly introduced into the world.

On this memorable day my long dark curls disappeared for ever, and I began to wear my hair in the "grown-up" fashion of those days, rolled back from my temples over a frizette, and plaited in large, heavy coils behind. Bridget left me when my toilette was completed, and I stood before the long pier-glass, which decorated the door of my wardrobe, and surveyed myself leisurely.

I am an old woman now, and there are few living who can testify to my having possessed my share of good looks in my youth, so I must do myself the justice of saying that at seventeen I was a very pretty girl. My eyes were large and very dark—soft, loving eyes as a rule, but capable of melting into tears or flashing into anger at the shortest notice. My hair was also dark, with a golden tinge; and my complexion was fair and clear. My figure was tolerably graceful and well-proportioned, but very small, and my want of height was a constant cause of annoyance and humiliation to me, owing to the unkind remarks of Eugénie, who was continually making com-

parisons between me and my cousins, who were both very tall and distinguished-looking; for Eugénie was still retained in the household, though her services as governess were no longer required.

I have often pondered over the cause of my aunt's infatuation for this woman; but it may easily be accounted for by the influence which a strong mind can always exert over a weak one, and also from the simple fact that she made herself extremely useful.

Whenever and however her services were required, whether as a reader, as house-keeper, or as a chaperone for us girls, she was always at hand, always ready, always capable, and, above all, always willing to give a decisive opinion on every subject—a quality which saved my aunt a world of trouble of the kind to which she was most averse.

I was not on much better terms with the Frenchwoman than I had been ten years before. As I grew up, and became emancipated from the petty tyrannies and restraints of the school-room, she had no

longer the power of embittering my life as she had done, and she even tried occasionally to make friends with me. But it never answered for long—our natures were antagonistic. I disliked and despised her character, and did not scruple to show it; and, of course, she hated me in return. I feel now that I was wrong in this.

Without becoming intimate with her, or in any way countenancing her many deceptive practices, it was my clear duty to be at least civil to an inmate of my uncle's house. I should have been courteous too, if not conciliating. Well, I paid bitterly for my pride and intolerance in later years.

To return to my story. When I had duly surveyed myself in the glass, and felt satisfied that my dress was well arranged and my hair perfectly in order, I went downstairs to the dining-room, where I found Adelaide making tea. This duty always fell upon her, for Laura disliked it, and my aunt never now made her appearance till near luncheon. My cousins had grown up fine-looking girls—Laura hand-

some rather than pretty, with regular features, and a very quiet, reserved manner. Adelaide was far more "taking," and was as pretty as golden hair, bright blue eyes, and a brilliant complexion could make her. She came forward and kissed me as I entered the room, wishing me many happy returns of the day. Laura did the same more quietly, not less kindly.

"There is only one letter for you, Florence," said Adelaide. "I should think myself ill-used if I got no more on my birthday."

"You forget how few people there are who ever write to me," I answered, a little sadly, as I opened my letter, which only contained a few kind lines from my old friend, Mr. Clay.

"Mamma wishes you to go with her and call on our new Rector this afternoon, Florry," said Laura.

"I suppose I may go as well?" asked Adelaide, a shade suddenly crossing her bright face.

"I don't know; mamma said nothing about you."

"It will look very odd, if mamma takes neither of her own daughters. We ought to make acquaintance with our new clergyman."

"Oh, nonsense, Addie. What can you care for going to see a pack of children? There is no wife, and Mr. Moreton is quite an elderly man."

"Pray go, if you like, Adelaide," said I; "it is all the same to me."

"Mamma likes to settle these things," said Laura, quietly.

At that moment, Eugénie entered the room, and Adelaide addressed herself to her.

"Don't you think it would be much better for me to go to the rectory with mamma this afternoon, instead of Florence? I am so anxious to see them, Eugénie, and Florry does not care a bit about it."

The governess threw up her little brown hands in deprecation. "Do not appeal to me, Adelaide; I am no longer your governess. Your mother will settle these things. It is natural that Florence should wish for the drive,—most natural. It is not till

we get older that we learn to think of others."

"I have said that I don't care how it is settled," I said, impatiently. "Have it your own way, Adelaide."

"Say one word to mamma, and I shall be allowed to go. Do, dear Eugénie," said Adelaide, coaxingly.

"How can you be such a baby?" exclaimed Laura. "I won't have mamma worried about it. She has said what she wishes, and there is an end of it."

And having finished her breakfast, she rose and left the room.

The thought crossed my mind that, perhaps, she felt a little jealous of the French-woman's influence with my aunt, and, glancing at Eugénie, I perceived, by her compressed lip and lowering brow, that she thought the same.

After this conversation, I was not astonished, when the carriage came to the door in the afternoon, to see Adelaide appear in the hall, dressed in her best clothes, a smart little hat, with a long blue feather, perched on the top of her

abundant golden tresses. My aunt glanced at her toilette with a smile.

“My dear Addie, is that costume intended to amaze poor Mr. Moreton and his family? You really should not dress yourself up in that absurd way to call on a quiet country clergyman.”

“Dear mamma, I’m sorry you don’t like it. I sent for the hat from London, and Eugénie says it is in excellent taste.”

“Perhaps so, for a flower-show or a croquet-party. Florence looks much better in her quiet black hat for a visit of this sort.”

“Oh, of course!” muttered Adelaide; and, as she got into the carriage, she threw an unamiable glance at me, to which I was very well accustomed.

It was a lovely drive, and I had ample opportunity for observing the beauties of the scenery, as Adelaide spoke not a word, and my aunt dozed quietly, as she invariably did in the open carriage. The last ten years had removed all trace of beauty from her worn countenance, but my Aunt Edith was still a singularly

graceful, lady-like looking woman, with a sweet manner and gentle way of speaking, which Eugénie was always exhorting me to copy,—I grieve to say, without the slightest success.

We were ushered into the same pretty drawing-room at the rectory to which we had been accustomed in the time of old Mr. Lang, our late Rector, who had been dead some few weeks. The same room certainly, but it looked very different in our eyes.

The new-comers were evidently people of taste. A pretty bright chintz covered the cumbrous old-fashioned bits of furniture, and the old, dirty, second-rate oil pictures had been removed, and some nice water-colour drawings hung in their places, all of them executed with considerable taste and finish. The servant had informed us that “Miss Moreton” was at home; but on coming into the shady room from the fierce glare of the sun outside, we did not at first notice that a young lady was lying on a sofa drawn close to the window, at the far end of the room. She shook hands

with us without rising, and explained, in answer to my aunt's kind inquiry, that she was an invalid, and was not able to stand without assistance.

Aunt Edith was attracted by the sweet voice and manner, and, taking a seat close to the sofa, she entered into conversation at once, while I leant back in my chair, and had time to observe our new acquaintance at my leisure. Sweet Dorothy Moreton! I love to think of her as she appeared the first time I ever saw her, and recall the first impression she made upon me. Hers was a singularly bright and intelligent countenance. Every feature was regular, and delicately formed,—far too refined, indeed, for health; but her eyes were a clear hazel, with a sweet yet penetrating glance,—nothing feeble or sickly about *them*. It seemed to me, in my ignorance, that they could not be the eyes of a hopeless invalid. Since then, I have often seen that peculiar look in the eyes of those afflicted with some dire incurable disease, as if the pure soul were seeking to wear a way through the frail, emaciated body.

In the midst of my romantic musings, Mr. Moreton came into the room. He was a grave, elderly man, with grey hair, and a tall, bent figure. Very like his daughter; the same regular features and sweet, steady glance, and much of the same frank, cordial manner. He entered into conversation with my aunt, and, nothing loth, I crossed over to Miss Moreton's sofa, and commenced the conversation by inquiring if she found the time pass very slowly.

"Not at all," she replied, with a smile. "You see, I have plenty to do. There are the household matters to arrange in the morning, two little sisters to be taught, and there are plenty of ways in which I can help my father. At least, he is kind enough to say so," she added, with a sigh, "though I am sometimes afraid he *makes* work for me to do. It is such a pleasure to feel that one is not quite useless." Here a little sister stole into the room, and stood by Miss Moreton's sofa with a shy, bent head. "This is little Rose; shake hands, dear."

The child was evidently so painfully shy, that I turned away from her, and asked Miss

Moreton if she was able to read to herself at all?"

"A little, sometimes, but it tires me to hold a book for long. I like work better."

"Is this yours?" And I took up a delicate piece of lacework which was lying on a table near. "How beautiful it is! Is it for an evening dress?"

"Oh, no," and she smiled. "I should have no use for an evening dress."

"She does it to sell," put in little Rose.

"You do it for sale?" I exclaimed, and then blushed at my own rudeness.

She answered quietly,—

"Yes. If I made no use of it, I could not spare the time it takes. The lace is worth thirty shillings a yard, and there is enough there to pay for winter dresses for both my little sisters."

"It must be a very happy thing to feel that you are so 'useful,'" I said, warmly.

"I have a very happy life—far happier, I think, than some people who have no great trial to bear. Every one is so very kind to me."

"No one could help it," I thought, gazing

at the bright, sweet face, in every line of which there was a trace of terrible suffering well and cheerfully borne.

“And besides my little sisters,” she continued, “I have the kindest brother in the world. It is always so pleasant when Arthur is at home. He is away now, but he will be home again in a week. I will show you his picture.”

And she took a little framed miniature from the table near the sofa, and held it out to me. I gazed at it attentively, and was certainly disappointed. There was none of his sister’s regularity of feature, but it was a face of considerable power. There were lines of thought and intellect round the firm mouth and square, low brow, but the features were harsh, and the expression grave almost to severity.

“He looks very clever,” I said; and then added, with one of my foolish, irresistible impulses, “he is not nearly as handsome as you are pretty.”

She was not offended—it seemed as if nothing could offend her; but she looked surprised, and then smiled, and began

telling me various anecdotes of the goodness and talent of this much-loved brother. This subject lasted us till my aunt rose to take leave; and, as I took leave of my new friend, she expressed a kind wish to see me soon again.

All the way home I attended little to Adelaide's voluble chatter, or Aunt Edith's gentle platitudes. My thoughts were entirely taken up with the charming acquaintance I had just formed. Surely, at last, I had found one who would fulfil all my romantic girlish dreams of a real, true, congenial friendship.

My life had hitherto been a lonely sort of existence, though surrounded with so-called friends. My uncle was absorbed in his own pursuits; my aunt, with her many ailments, real and imaginary; Laura was indifferent; Adelaide, selfish and frivolous; Eugénie, antagonistic. My only real friend had been Bridget; and she, good soul, was little fitted to act as confidant to a clever, enthusiastic girl of seventeen.

In this frame of mind, it may be imagined that I was both displeased and surprised

when, at tea that evening, Adelaide finished a not very complimentary description of our new friends by the remark,—

“I do not advise you to visit them, Laura. You will find nothing to amuse you. An old father of at least sixty, a sickly-looking invalid, and two plain little girls.”

“I advised you not to go,” was Laura’s answer. “I knew you would not care about knowing quiet people like that, who do not include one young man in their family-party.”

“Well, for once you were right,” returned Adelaide, not perceiving the satirical drift of her sister’s speech.

“It is only an afternoon wasted. I shall not go again.”

“You are wrong, Adelaide,” said I. “There is a brother, and he is expected home in a few days.”

“Really!” exclaimed Adelaide, with interest. “I wonder if he plays croquet, and can take a tenor part in a glee.”

“He is reading for the Church.”

“Oh!” in a disappointed tone.

“And he is not in the least handsome, and he hates croquet, and has no taste for music,” I continued, with a malicious delight at Adelaide’s lengthening visage.

“You seem to have got much information from Miss Moreton,” remarked Eugénie, in her imperfect English. “You must surely have discussed nothing else but this young man.”

“We talked of many things,” I answered, coldly. “Miss Moreton is very pleasant and clever, and has the most charming face I ever saw. I hope we may become friends—*real* friends.”

“*Ma foi*, a love at first sight!” exclaimed Eugénie.

I did not reply, but took my sketch-book, and strolled into the garden, ostensibly, to finish a pencil sketch I was making of the house, in reality, that I might have a short time of peaceful leisure to think over the events of the afternoon.

It was strange how my thoughts reverted again and again to the plain but striking likeness of Miss Moreton’s brother, and her loving, enthusiastic description of the

original. I thought how different my own life might have been if I had but possessed such a brother. He might have had the fortune and estates (oh! how gladly), would he but have given me the loving, protecting care which I had lost when I was six years old, and was never likely to know again.

I was rapidly working myself into a morbid, discontented frame of mind, most unsuitable to a young heiress on her seventeenth birthday; but my reverie was not destined to last long. In about half-an-hour, Adelaide appeared, and threw herself on the grass by my side, her face actually beaming with pleasure.

“Such jolly news, Florry! Guess what it is.”

I was in a meditative mood, and, vexed at the interruption, I answered, crossly,—

“I never can guess anything. You had better tell me at once.”

“Not till you have guessed once.”

“Is Eugénie going to leave? That is the happiest event that could happen to the family, in my opinion.”

“No, you stupid child!—something much nicer than that. Lady Hunter is going to give a ball at the Lodge, and mamma says you may go with us. What do you think of that?”

This *was* news. I threw down my pencils, and became almost as much excited as Adelaide herself.

“Mamma says we are to have our dresses from London,” continued Adelaide. “Laura and I are to wear blue, and you pink and white, or white with pink roses. I forget which Eugénie said.”

“I shall choose my own dress,” was my somewhat ungracious answer. “Eugénie need not trouble herself. I wonder if I shall dance much. It will be different for me, you see, Adelaide. I know no one.”

“Oh, *you* will have plenty of partners,” replied Adelaide, a shadow crossing her bright face. “You are an heiress, Florry, and some people will think you a beauty. Laura and I will be thought nothing of when you appear.”

At this moment, Eugénie appeared at the open window, calling to us to come

in, as the dews were falling. For once, I obeyed gladly. It was a new idea to me that I should stand in my cousin's way in society, and I could not but see that it was likely to happen. Yet, surely Adelaide could never be envious of me—Adelaide, with her bright beauty, and sweet winning ways. It was altogether an unpleasant idea, and I dismissed it from my mind as soon as possible.

CHAPTER IV.

A GLIMPSE OF THE WORLD.

Beauty, which, whether waking or asleep,
Shot forth peculiar graces.

MILTON.

ABOUT ten days after our visit to the Moretons, I took the opportunity afforded by another idle afternoon to stroll out into the garden, with the purpose of completing my sketch of the house, which, like Penelope's web, seemed ever on the point of completion, but never satisfactorily finished. It was a lovely August day,—warm, tranquil, delicious,—and I soon grew tired of drawing, and wandered farther away from the sunny garden into a shady little copse which skirted our grounds, and then I sat down on a mossy bank, and, taking out my pocket edition of Tennyson, began to read the 'Lotos-Eaters.'

The dreamy rhythm of that delicious poem, the heat of the weather, and the soothing, monotonous hum of bees close to my ear, all combined to make me feel drowsy; and before very long the book dropped from my hand, and I fell fast asleep. I was awakened by hearing voices close to my ear,—a little girl's first, in tones of eager surprise.

“Look, Arthur, she is asleep. Did you ever see anything so pretty?”

“Hush, Rose,” replied a young man's voice, in a low, reproving tone. “You will wake her.”

“It is little Miss Hatherleigh, of Dalehurst,” half whispered the child. “She came to see us the other day, and Dorothy says she is charming. I think she would be lovely if she were not so tiny, don't you?”

I could stand it no longer, and, raising myself from my comfortable rest on the bank, I opened my eyes wide. They fell on a young man standing a few paces from me, a little girl clinging to his hand, both looking extremely embarrassed and

uncomfortable. I recognized at once the original of Miss Moreton's miniature, and stopped his apologies by assuring him that he had not disturbed me in the least (rather barefaced this), and that certainly they were not trespassing, as the path through the copse, though private property, was open to all.

Little Rose, who had resumed all her native shyness the instant I opened my eyes, contented herself with performing an awkward sort of introduction, and then flew off after a butterfly, while Mr. Moreton and I exchanged a few civil sentences.

Few young men, on making a young lady's acquaintance under such romantic circumstances, would have failed to "improve the occasion" by some kind of compliment; but this was evidently not Mr. Moreton's style. His manner was perfectly courteous, but cold,—some would have called it haughty. His face, too, was even plainer than his miniature. The harsh, irregular features were very much tanned, and hardly redeemed from actual ugliness by bright, dark, intelligent eyes, and a very sweet smile.

At seventeen we are apt to judge people entirely by their outward appearance, and Mr. Moreton's seemed to me so unprepossessing, that I made the interview as short as possible, and walked away without even waiting for little Rose's return.

"So *this* is Miss Moreton's paragon of a brother," I said to myself, with a regretful feeling. "I thought he would have been so nice; but he gives himself as many airs as if he were a bishop already, instead of a young man reading for his ordination. How such a man can ever think of becoming a *curate*!" And I smiled as I thought of the only specimen of our young clérgy who had come under my notice,—a certain Mr. Ellis, who had acted as curate in Dalehurst for some years, and was reported to be hopelessly smitten by Adelaide's charms.

Tall and slim, with light hair and eyes, delicate in health, devoted to young ladies, croquet, and Tennyson, he was, indeed, a contrast to young Mr. Moreton, with his stern, rugged features, and cold, uncompromising manner. Certainly he would have

no chance of pleasing Adelaide if he spoke to her as he had spoken to me. And I smiled again as I thought of that spoilt young beauty, who was accustomed to receive fervent admiration and homage from every gentleman of her acquaintance. She would receive neither from this cold, calm young man, who had conversed with me with the same polite, tranquil indifference that he might have shown to my uncle.

In the garden I met both the girls with Eugénie, so I joined them, and related my little adventure.

Eugénie shook her head, and seemed to doubt the propriety of the whole affair. Laura, as usual, withheld her opinion, and Adelaide complained, in an injured tone, that she had fallen asleep half-a-dozen times in that same copse, but had never been discovered by any one. Some people never had any luck.

"No doubt you took care to fall asleep in a becoming attitude," remarked Eugénie, with a sarcastic smile.

"I am very sorry that I can't tell you,"

I retorted, sharply. "Very likely I was snoring, with my mouth wide open. All I know is, that Mr. Moreton is not a very agreeable person, and I don't care if I never see him again." And I ran on alone to the house.

Here I found Bridget busily engaged in unpacking my ball-dress, which had just arrived from London.

Next day, Lady Hunter's ball was to take place. Need I say that, though I did not dream of it (I observe that we seldom dream of anything that is occupying a very prominent place in our thoughts), I thought of it all day and half the night, and the hours dragged along wearily till it was time to go and dress.

At half-past nine on the important evening we were all ready, and assembled in the dining-room. I had been tolerably satisfied with my own appearance before I quitted my room. The soft white clouds of tulle suited me well, and gave to my tiny figure a little of that dignified grace of which it stood much in need. For once I flattered myself that I looked like

a young lady instead of an insignificant little school-girl.

But when Adelaide entered the room, all my satisfaction with my own toilette vanished. How lovely she was! The light-blue dress, trimmed with pale roses, suited her brilliant complexion admirably; and her golden hair was all drawn away from the fair brows, and crowned with a rose-bud wreath. Eugénie's excellent taste had, indeed, excelled itself in her toilette.

Laura looked handsome and lady-like, but Adelaide might have been Titania herself, prepared to hold a court in the misty realms of Fairy-land. She floated up to me, and surveyed my simple white dress with a critical air.

"You look very nice, little cousin," was her remark. "Does not that dress suit her well, Eugénie? It makes her look quite tall."

"It does fairly well," replied the governess. "It was the best that I could think of for her. No doubt when one is so *very* dark, a little bright colour is more becoming,

but it would not be *convenable* for a young girl at her first ball."

I got into the carriage feeling crushed and mortified, sure that no one would notice me at the ball, while Adelaide would be, like a fairy princess, admired and envied by all. And I thought, with a bitter smile, of my fear that I should stand in my cousin's way in society.

My gentle aunt failed to console me by observing that Madame Loraine's taste could not fail to be perfect, and, no doubt, I was a difficult person to dress. So it occurred that I entered Lady Hunter's ball-room in a frame of mind the reverse of amiable, fully persuaded that I should meet with nothing but mortification and annoyance. However, it so chanced that I had no lack of partners. Some people *did* seem to notice the forlorn little figure in white, as I sat by my aunt's side, and I overheard one or two gentlemen asking who was that pretty little thing with the black eyes.

In the course of the evening, Lady Hunter introduced me to a Captain Astley,

who informed me during the "Lancers" that he had driven eight miles to attend the ball.

"That was taking a great deal of trouble," was my original remark. "Have you to return all that way to-night?"

"Indeed I have," he replied; "but I have a companion. By the way, he may be a relation of yours; his name is Hatherleigh—Sir Edgar Hatherleigh."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed, with a start. "He is abroad."

Captain Astley looked rather surprised.

"Fact, I assure you," he said, stroking his long, fair moustache. "If you doubt my word, Miss Hatherleigh, you will believe your own eyesight. There is Sir Edgar, talking to that lady in pink."

I glanced in the direction indicated, and at once recognized my cousin. He was very little altered. He had not been a pleasant-looking youth, and he was not an agreeable-looking man. Ten years had removed the boyishness of his appearance, and given him broader shoulders and a thicker moustache than of old; but the

narrow forehead, the reddish curling hair, and the small light eyes, with their peculiar furtive glance, all these were unchanged. I had just decided this point, when he happened to look up, and our eyes met.

There was no surprise in his glance of recognition; he simply bowed and smiled in the old, easy, off-hand way, and, when our dance was concluding, I found him close at my side, and, with a few words of explanation, I was transferred from Captain Astley's arm to his.

My first remark naturally expressed my surprise at seeing him at the ball, and also at his instantaneous recognition of me. He smiled.

"You are not much changed, Florence;" and his voice had the old patronizing ring, that I used so to dislike. "You are grown older and prettier, of course, but it is the same face I remember ten years ago."

No girl of seventeen is flattered by being told she is "not much changed" since her nursery days. I felt rather affronted, and my next remark was of the briefest.

"We thought you were abroad with your regiment."

"You were right," he replied. "I have only been in England three weeks. Probably you do not often take the trouble to study the Army List, or you would have seen that I am now a Captain in the 115th, and we are now quartered at Forde, eight miles from here. Lady Hunter is an old friend of mine, and she asked me to come to her dance, and bring any friends I liked. I only brought Astley, one of our Captains. A very good fellow he is, too; don't you like him?"

"Very much," I replied, absently, and not quite truly, for I had not found the worthy Captain's conversation very entertaining; but I was beginning to grow tired of promenading round the rooms. The old weariness and dislike of Sir Edgar's company began to make me feel restless, and I said, at last, that I wished to return to my aunt, and have a few minutes' rest before the next dance. But Sir Edgar had no such intention.

"You can spare me a few minutes,

Florence," he said, almost reproachfully. "I have not seen you for so long, and I have so much to ask you. Tell me a little about yourself. Are you happy with your guardian? or do you wish for any change?"

"No, thank you," was my somewhat ungracious answer. "I get on very well. Laura and Adelaide are here to-night. Have you seen them?"

"Yes; they are good-looking girls, Laura especially. Adelaide is just the pretty wax doll she always was."

"She is very much admired."

And we strolled through the rooms, talking in a desultory, ball-room sort of way; for I steadily resisted all my cousin's attempts to force any sort of confidential intercourse on me. At last we reached the conservatory, and rested for a few minutes, our chairs placed against a sort of ivy-covered trellis, which effectually concealed us from observation. Sir Edgar had ceased talking for a moment, and was stooping to pick up a glove I had just dropped, when suddenly a voice came from the other side of the screen.

“Was not that Miss Hatherleigh I saw walking with that plain young man just now? A pretty little thing, dressed in white and pink?”

“Yes,” replied another voice. “She is a fortunate young woman; it is a splendid property, and there has been a long minority. That plain young man was her cousin, Sir Edgar Hatherleigh.”

“Indeed! But he has not the Hatherleigh estates?”

“No, poor young man! it was a terrible loss to him. I am told that he still broods over it, and has tried to prove some flaw in old Sir Henry’s will. He is not likely to succeed. I know the family lawyer—”

I could listen no longer; but as I rose from my seat I glanced hastily at Sir Edgar. Had he also heard the conversation? It was impossible to say; but I thought his face was unusually flushed, and his former fluency in conversation seemed to have deserted him.

We walked to the corner of the room where my aunt was sitting, stately and dignified, in her black moire and white lace

shawl. I sat down by her ; and Sir Edgar stood by us for some time talking, and evidently making a very favourable impression on my aunt, who told Laura afterwards that he was “a very gentlemanly young man, with a good deal of information.” I soon left them to converse alone, for I had numerous partners, and was scarcely allowed a moment’s rest.

My first ball was certainly a success. Gradually my shy, self-depreciating feelings wore off, and I began to “see myself as others saw me,” and to realize the fact that I was anything but a plain or unattractive person.

Laura and Adelaide were not neglected ; but they had fewer partners than I had, though I commenced the evening with knowing no one, and they were on intimate terms with half the gentlemen in the room. The truth was, they had each been out two or three years, and were well known in the neighbourhood. I was perfectly *new*, and (as I was soon informed) a very original and unsophisticated young lady ; besides which, my reputation as an heiress had preceded

me. So I danced gaily with the dragoon officers from Forde, and the sons of the neighbouring "gentry and aristocracy," till Laura tossed her handsome head in disdain, and Addie absolutely tore all the feather trimming off her fan in a fit of genuine temper.

And I cared not at all, but enjoyed myself thoroughly, having determined, for this one night, at least, to dismiss all unpleasant ideas, and yield myself entirely to the pleasant excitement of the moment.

My aunt always left early, and by two o'clock we were all again ensconced in the comfortable old family coach, and rolling rapidly back to Dalehurst. The dim light of the carriage-lamps showed Adelaide's golden head nodding in the opposite corner to me, and Laura endeavouring to follow her example; but I felt wide awake, and gazed out of the window at the clear dark-blue of the heavens, with its countless twinkling stars — not, alas! engaged in the solemn and profitable meditations which that glorious spectacle should have suggested,

but thinking over, with a sensation of gratified vanity (so sweet, because so new to me), all the flattering speeches and compliments which had been made to me during the evening. Very likely half of them were false and the rest exaggerated. What did it signify? I had been admired, courted, envied, and I was but seventeen, and this my first ball.

I was roused from my blissful meditations by Aunt Edith's sleepy voice saying,—

“I have asked your cousin to come and spend part of his next leave with us, Florence. I thought it would only be a proper attention on our part, and he has very few relations in England, poor young man.”

“When does his leave begin?” I asked, feeling wholly unable to express the gratification which I knew was expected of me.

“In a month,” was my aunt's reply.

“Perhaps he will be asked to spend it somewhere else?” I observed, in a hopeful tone.

“He must, at any rate, come first to us, as he accepted the invitation,” put in Laura.

“And he is a very pleasant young man,” continued my aunt. “I hoped you had got over that childish prejudice, Florence.”

I said no more, but the words I had overheard that evening came back to my mind, and I felt as if it would have been almost worth while to have missed Lady Hunter’s delightful ball, if, by so doing, we could have kept clear of Sir Edgar.

My dreams that night were not of brilliant lighted rooms, fair faces, merry music, and “twinkling feet”; but I thought in my sleep that I was standing on the brink of a precipice — a chasm, dark, vast, impenetrable, yawned before me. I turned away in terror, and would have left the spot, but was restrained by a strong hand, which impelled me, with steady, irresistible force, onwards to the perilous edge. I struggled to be free, but in vain, and, looking up in agony, I saw the white, pitiless face of my cousin, Sir Edgar Hatherleigh, bending

over me with a smile of cruel triumph. The horror of that recognition awoke me, and, wearied as I was, I slept no more that night. Surely there have been many, since the day of the wise men of old, who have been "warned of God in a dream."

CHAPTER V.

THE DAY AFTER THE BALL.

Oh, blindness to the future ! kindly given,
That each may fill the circle marked by Heaven.

POPE.

THE next day after a ball is never very pleasant. Every one is tired, and it is a chance, indeed, if some have not been disappointed of their own pleasure, and are proportionately envious of others. Certainly this was the case with us. Laura did not come down at all in the morning and though Adelaide made her appearance about eleven o'clock, she was so cross and tired (besides taking pains to be particularly disagreeable to me), that I wished heartily she had remained in her own room.

Uncle John and Eugénie were the only persons in the house who seemed in a cheerful and rational frame of mind ; and

not finding their society altogether to my taste, I ordered my horse at twelve o'clock, and determined to pay my long-promised visit to Dorothy Moreton.

The day was very lovely,—warm, but not too hot; the sun's rays well tempered by soft, white fleecy clouds scattered over the sky. All the fatigue and languor caused by the evening's dissipation seemed to vanish as I rode across the park. My pretty bay mare, Ladybird, seemed to guess that I was not in a humour to care for her gambols, and she bore me as gently and steadily as it was possible for her to do. We wore no stiff men's riding-hats in those days,—mine was of soft grey felt, with a white ostrich feather; so I could raise it occasionally from my head, and let the cool breeze play on my heated brow, and amongst my thick, wavy hair.

A gentle canter along the sunny lanes for about half a mile, a short but steep incline, and then about a mile of gently sloping down, brought me to the parsonage. Miss Moreton was “at home,” and I dismounted, and, throwing the reins to a

groom, entered the pretty little drawing-room, somewhat encumbered by holding up my heavy blue riding skirt. Miss Moreton was lying on the sofa, engaged in overlooking a formidable account-book; but she laid it aside as I entered, and looked up with a bright smile of welcome.

"This is kind, Miss Hatherleigh; but what a hot morning for you to ride all this way!"

"It is not so very hot," I replied; "but your room feels most refreshingly cool."

And I sat down by her side, and we commenced chatting in the most open and friendly terms. There was a singular charm about Dorothy Moreton's manner. She possessed one rare and most delightful gift—she was a good listener, and always seemed to be paying the closest attention to what you were saying. She was not a great talker herself, but she had a knack of drawing out your confidence; and you never repented having given it, for you were sure to meet with the warmest sympathy in return.

We naturally discussed Lady Hunter's

ball, and Dorothy (we had come to call each other by our Christian names) smiled as I described the "glorious evening" I had enjoyed.

"Life opens very brightly for you," she said, with a little sigh. "Like Tennyson's Lady Clara, you have 'joyous health and boundless wealth.'"

"Do you think it is such a blessing to be very rich, Dorothy?" I asked.

She answered with some reserve,—

"Doubtless money is a gift from God, and may not be despised; besides, it is the source of so much pleasure, and is a grand means of usefulness."

"But should you care to be an heiress?" I asked, persistently.

"I can scarcely tell, dear Florence. We have been suffering more or less all our lives from the want of money, so that I can hardly imagine what it would be to have too much of it. But my real opinion is that mediocrity in all earthly things is safest for a woman. The richest, the most talented, the most lovely women, have not been the happiest."

“No,” I replied, thoughtfully, a score of mournfully illustrious names flitting through my mind. “And, after all, one is able to do so little good with one’s money. What with guardians first, and a husband afterwards, a girl heiress has very little command of her fortune!”

We talked on this subject for nearly an hour, when the door opened suddenly, and Mr. Arthur Moreton made his appearance, holding a basket filled with fruit in one hand, his youngest sister, Eleanor, clinging to the other. Dorothy looked up with a loving smile.

“This is Miss Hatherleigh, Arthur; you have met before, I think?”

He shook hands with the quiet self-possession of a gentleman, and, despite his well-worn coat, wide-awake hat, and rough tanned hands, he *did* look every inch a gentleman. His manner was more pleasing than it had been on the occasion of our first acquaintance. He sat down, and talked with the ease of a clever, well - informed man, for another half-hour, till I glanced at my watch,

and was horrified to find it was nearly two o'clock.

I stood up at once, and bent down to receive Dorothy's farewell kiss, when a new and strange sensation came over me. Whether it was owing to my long ride in the sun, or to the fatigue and excitement of the previous evening, I cannot tell, but everything in the room seemed to grow indistinct. Dorothy's anxious, startled face faded away into air, and, for the first and last time in my life, I fainted dead away. When I came to myself, I was lying on Dorothy's sofa, and she was bending over me, supported on crutches, her kind face full of commiseration and anxiety. I felt distressed to see her standing, and would have risen at once, but the first movement made my head swim, and the giddy, sick feeling return, and Dorothy said,—

“Don't try to rise, dear; lie still, and you will be better in a few minutes. See, Arthur, her colour is coming back.”

Apparently “Arthur” was not far off, for I felt my hand enclosed in a decidedly

masculine grasp, and my pulse felt with a scientific touch.

"She is better, Dorothy, much better; but I am glad you sent to Dalehurst; no doubt they will send the carriage. She must not attempt to ride."

"Have you sent home?" I asked, languidly opening my eyes.

"Yes, dear; we thought it better," said Dorothy's kind voice.

"Oh, here is the Dalehurst carriage; how quick they have been."

In another moment, Eugénie entered the room, her sharp, sallow little face, with its inquisitive black eyes, looking strangely out of place in that pleasant, quiet room.

"Ah, *quel malheur*," she exclaimed, *fussing* up to me in the peculiarly irritating way Frenchwomen have; "it is well that we met the messenger, or delay might have proved inconvenient. My poor child, you look ill, you require air. Allow me to fan you."

"No, thank you," I said, crossly, moving away from her officious fingers. I knew she never spoke to me in this tone of

affection unless there were strangers by to notice her manner, and say, "What a delightful governess Mrs. Stuart has; she is quite a mother to those girls!"

Mr. Moreton looked rather surprised at my tone, and was particularly civil in his manner to Eugénie, taking care that she did not miss the grateful thanks which no doubt he thought would have come most properly from me.

In a few minutes I was seated in our own carriage, with Eugénie by my side. No sooner were we alone than her manner changed.

"I never knew you to faint before, Florence," she remarked, with asperity. "Are you sure you did not do it partly for the pleasure of being nursed and petted by your dear new friends?"

I was leaning back in the corner of the carriage, feeling too weak and ill for any altercation, and made no reply to this unfeeling question.

Eugénie continued,—

"It is strange that you should have been out to-day, for a great event has

happened. We have had actually a visitor—a gentleman!”

“Indeed!” I said, determined not to show any curiosity.

“One of your partners at the ball last night.”

“Oh.”

“A military man; so good-looking, and—how do you say it in English?—*avec une taille magnifique*.”

I made no remark.

“Shall I tell you his name?” she asked, with some disappointment. She would have liked to tease me by whetting my curiosity, and then leaving it ungratified.

“If you like; I really don’t care.”

“It is a Captain Astley; and he has been talking with Adelaide for ever so long, and singing, actually singing, a duet with her—oh, so beautifully!”

“Your swan has turned out a goose indeed,” I said, contemptuously. “Captain Astley is one of the stupidest men I ever met; and as for looks, our new gardener is as handsome as he is, and much in the same style.”

It was strange how intercourse with Eugénie always brought out all the worst features of my character. You would scarcely have recognized the quiet, subdued, yet cheerful girl, who had chatted so happily the Moretons, with the disagreeable young person who seemed always either wilful and passionate, or obstinate and sulky.

Engénie said no more, and our drive soon came to an end.

When we reached Dalehurst, I went upstairs at once, and rested for an hour, hoping to escape the gay party in the drawing-room. Judge of my surprise, when at last I descended, to find Captain Astley still there, comfortably established as an *ami de la maison*.

My aunt was leaning back in her easy-chair, nearly asleep; Laura had taken her work to the window, and sat still, with an air of dignified disapprobation; while Adelaide and the Captain gossiped over some music in a corner, evidently on the easiest and best of terms.

The truth was, our visitor's horse had

fallen lame (at least, was reported to have done so), and the delay occasioned obliged Aunt Edith to ask him to stay to luncheon, after which he applied himself to investigating a pile of old music in the back drawing-room, and, with Adelaide's assistance, discovered some pretty old songs, some of which they sang together. He had ridden over in order to bring a message from my cousin Sir Edgar, to say that he hoped to come to us the following Tuesday. Doubtless the worthy Captain had eagerly embraced this opportunity of obtaining an *entrée* to the residence of the young lady with whose charms he had been deeply smitten at the ball.

If my girlish vanity had ventured to suggest that he had ridden over to see *me*, I was soon undeceived. Every word he spoke, every glance of his eye, each display of his really beautiful tenor voice, was for Adelaide, and Adelaide alone. I must say that my opinion of him was not heightened by this admiration.

Directly Adelaide became aware of the admiration of "one of the opposite sect,"

as Mr. Sketchley would say, she began to be worse than silly, her manners were actually presuming and forward. Such airs and graces, such “nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles,” could only have made an impression on one of the weakest of mankind. But Captain Astley seemed quite enchanted, stroked his fair moustache, lost no opportunity of catching Adelaide’s eye, or furtively touching her hand, as they explored the piles of old manuscript music, and seemed altogether in the seventh heaven of felicity.

Heartily glad were we all (with one exception, of course) when at last he came forward to take leave, observing with that graceful fluency which characterized him, that he “had passed a most delightful er afternoon, and should have been delighted to have remained another er hour, only they were cursed with such a confoundedly punctual er Major, that it would not answer to be er behindhand in the performance of his er evening duties.” And he swung himself out of the house with the peculiarly stiff, dignified gait which distinguishes infantry officers who have been drilled till

their bodies are like pieces of walking mechanism.

Laura looked up at last, and began to lecture Adelaide on her "extraordinary and unbecoming conduct," and I, foreseeing a storm, stole away, and went to rest my aching forehead and tired limbs in the cool solitude of the library.

CHAPTER VI.

LEAVES FROM AN OLD DIARY.

Be not over exquisite
To cast the fashion of uncertain evils ;
For, grant they be so, while they rest unknown,
What need a man forestall his date of grief,
And run to meet what he would most avoid.

MILTON.

SEPT. 1ST.—Eleven o'clock. My cousin, Sir Edgar, arrives to-day. I went to see Dorothy Moreton again yesterday, and told her the foolish dread I cannot help feeling of his visit to us. I have an unaccountable fear (if I were inclined to be superstitious, I should call it a presentiment) of his sleeping under the same roof with me. I cannot explain it, I cannot reason myself out of it; all I know is, that it is there.

Dorothy listened patiently to all I had to say, and then, instead of blaming me

for indulging a foolish prejudice, as many would have done, she said, gently,—

“You must try and shake off these unpleasant fancies about your cousin, dear Florence. They may have no foundation in fact, and, in any case, you cannot go wrong in treating Sir Edgar with the ordinary politeness due to every gentleman. And, you know, that is the surest way of keeping him at a distance till you find out more about his character.”

Dorothy is right, as she always is. My behaviour shall be marked with a cold, scrupulous politeness, that most impassable barrier to any familiar intercourse, if only I can keep this impetuous temper of mine in check when I am brought in daily contact with Sir Edgar and his provoking conceited ways. I will try, at any rate.

Seven o'clock. Sir Edgar has arrived. I have just a few minutes to spare before dressing for dinner, and I must employ them in writing down my firm opinion that he is entirely altered—not the same man in any way. I cannot think what has come over him. I really believe if I

had met him for the first time this afternoon, and had conceived no previous dislike or prejudice against him, that I should have pronounced him a very agreeable man. The old haughty, dictatorial manner (conspicuous even at Lady Hunter's ball, a fortnight since) has entirely disappeared; he is gentle in all his ways, especially to me, and seems to wish to please everybody. Perhaps, after all, I have been behaving like a foolish, vindictive child, imagining evil where it did not exist, and mistaking a faulty manner for a depraved heart.

SEPT. 3RD.—Yesterday, Captain Astley rode over again from Forde, and he and Sir Edgar played with us at croquet on the lawn. We soon grew tired of the game; it was very warm, and no one played well, so we gave it up after half-an-hour, and wandered about the grounds instead.

About four o'clock I recollected that some ferns were wanted for the drawing-room flower-vases, and I wandered alone into the park to get some. I was at first unsuccessful in my search, and so was

detained longer than I had expected. When, at last, I turned my steps towards home, the heat was still so great that I determined to go round by the shrubberies instead of crossing the sunny garden. As I neared the house, I heard the sound of voices close to me, and Sir Edgar and Captain Astley suddenly turned into the path just before me. They passed so close that Sir Edgar's foot actually brushed my dress, but they did not notice me. They were walking arm-in-arm, and were apparently deep in conversation. I was just about to retrace my steps and enter the garden, when I heard my own name mentioned, and paused involuntarily for an instant. Sir Edgar was speaking in a low but excited tone of voice.

"I tell you, Astley, something must be done, and that quickly. You have no idea of the state of my affairs. I doubt if I can keep my head above water for another six months."

Captain Astley answered, in his sleepy voice,—

"The remedy is close at hand. I wish

I had as good a chance of stepping into a snug property as you have."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do. You need not act to empty benches, Hatherleigh. The whole regiment has guessed your reason for coming to spend your long leave in this dead-alive place. Take my advice, propose to your cousin without delay, and fulfil your destiny like a sensible man. I am sure she is a pretty, lady-like little thing; no man need be ashamed of her."

I could not wait to hear Sir Edgar's answer. A sudden horror came over me, and I fled away to the house, not even taking the precaution to glance behind me to see if I had been noticed. *This*, then, was the meaning of Sir Edgar's changed manner; *this* was the purpose he had in view when he wheedled my aunt into inviting him to stay here.

When I had safely reached the solitude of my own room, I positively stamped with passion, and then threw myself on the bed and shed tears of bitter rage and mortification, like the foolish, passionate,

undisciplined child I was. At this juncture, Bridget chanced to enter the room, and stood aghast at the mournful spectacle of her darling child lying prone on the bed, deluged in tears, her face swollen and disfigured by grief. I struggled to my feet, and endeavoured to resume an air of dignified composure.

"It is nothing, Bridget; do let me alone. No, I am not ill, and no one has been unkind to me."

My dear old nurse threw down the bundle of clean clothes she was carrying, and took me in her arms like a great baby.

"There's sure to be some trouble as long as that man is in the house," she said, indignantly. "There always was, and there always will be. He's a mischief-maker, if I ever saw one in my life. I wish he had never come here, with his ugly face, prying and poking."

"Bridget, who are you speaking of?"

I looked up and saw Laura standing in the doorway, looking very much astonished and displeased.

"What do you want here?" I asked,

starting from my comfortable nest in Bridget's arms.

"Papa wants you in the library," she said, coldly; "but I advise you not to go downstairs till you have smoothed your hair. You look as if you had been dragged through a hedge backwards."

I turned to the glass, and hastily brushed my rough, wavy hair, and then hastened downstairs, nearly overstepping my sober cousin in my headlong career. I found my uncle in a state of considerable perturbation. The young curate, Mr. Ellis, has actually made an offer for Adelaide, and has, of course, been refused.

My uncle detained me a long time, asking all sorts of questions, and endeavouring to find out from me if Adelaide had really encouraged the poor young man's attentions, and so given him cause for reasonable complaint. I know she has flirted with him in the most heartless way, but it was no affair of mine, and I steadily refused to compromise her.

My uncle could make nothing of my ambiguous answers; and at last, noticing my

flushed cheeks and heavy eyes, he suffered me to depart.

SEPT. 8TH.—Life in this house grows more insupportable every day. Laura and Adelaide have never been thoroughly cordial to me since Lady Hunter's ball, and Eugénie encourages them in their absurd jealousy. Aunt Edith has been having nervous headaches, and has kept almost entirely to her own room. As for Sir Edgar, I take good care to keep out of his way. He seems always watching for an opportunity to engage me in conversation, but I generally manage to elude him.

SEPT. 9th.—Caught at last. Yesterday afternoon, as I was coming down the stairs in my riding-habit, I encountered Sir Edgar in the act of ascending them. He presented my whip to me, which I had accidentally dropped. I took it with a cold word of thanks, and was turning to enter the hall, when, to my astonishment, he laid his hand on one of mine, and said,—

“You always seem to wish to avoid me, Florence. How have I managed to offend you?”

I said nothing, but stood twisting the gold handle of my whip, and wishing devoutly that I had remained upstairs.

"No prisoner is condemned without a hearing," he continued, with his provoking, deprecating smile. "If I am to be sent to Coventry for all time, at least let me know my offence. Surely that is only just."

"I never said I meant to send you to Coventry," I replied, impatiently.

"But you do it without announcing it, which is the worst sign of all."

"Let me go, please; Ladybird gets fidgetty if she is kept waiting."

Sir Edgar smiled, but did not relax his hold of my hand.

"You are unhappy, Florence, and therefore you are irritable. No, do not attempt to deny it; I am right in what I say. You are *not* happy here, and you are not loved, not appreciated. I saw that from the first. Do not turn away from me, dear, I will be a true friend to you if you will allow me."

Odious man, how I hated him! And to think that he should have the impertinence to call me "dear." I drew away my hand,

and moved forward to the hall-door, saying, as I looked him full in the face,—

“I am much obliged to you for your sympathy, Sir Edgar, especially as I know how *disinterested* it must be.”

The disdainful scorn in my voice seemed to strike him with disagreeable force; he made no further attempt to detain me, and I mounted Ladybird and rode away gladly.

SEPT. 15TH.—A great event has happened in our little parish. Mr. Ellis has announced his intention of resigning his curacy, probably owing to that foolish affair about Adelaide, and Mr. Arthur Moreton is to be curate here in his place. Every one seems pleased at the arrangement. Mr. Moreton is to be ordained in March, and will enter upon his duties as soon as possible afterwards. Meanwhile, he is doing much good in the parish, visiting the sick, and making acquaintance with his future charge, both rich and poor. Everything he attempts is done thoroughly and systematically. We are all agreed that he will prove a great acquisition to the parish. We have been going on in a stupid, humdrum way, and

need the arousing this young, energetic spirit will surely bring amongst us. I often see him when I go to visit Dorothy, and he is always kind and gentle with me; so at last I am getting over the repulsive feeling caused by his cold manner, and can talk to him quite openly. And I never meet him without feeling comforted and cheered, and going home strengthened in every good resolution and work.

His views on every subject are so large, so clear, so comprehensive; he will discuss the most difficult subject with you without your even realizing the delicate ground on which you are treading. He can bring down (or should I rather say *raise*) the most abstruse doctrine to the level of a child's intellect, explaining away and smoothing every difficulty by the wondrous magnetism of his clear, practical common-sense, combined with reasoning powers of a very high order.

It is well that I have something to interest me occasionally, for my life here grows every day more lonely and wretched. I can partly understand my cousin's feelings

towards me. We often see visitors, and occasionally dine and spend the day with friends, and on all these occasions I am the one most noticed, even most admired. Heaven knows, I wish it were not so. Sometimes I think I would gladly give up all my so-called advantages, youth, beauty, riches, for a little of the loving sympathy which seems so abundantly bestowed on others.

Here the Diary ends abruptly, and is not renewed for some months.

CHAPTER VII.

FIRST LOVE.

Why did she love him? Curious fool, be still;
Is human love the growth of human will?

BYRON.

THE materials for this record of my girlish days have been principally gathered from old letters, memorandums, and diaries. But after the entry transcribed in the last chapter, I can find no record of the next six months. My memory does not serve me with many details, but I remember that those months passed away drearily and unhappily; each day my aunt seemed to grow more feeble, mentally and bodily, my uncle more absorbed, my cousins more jealous and unkind.

We saw a great deal of Sir Edgar. After his visits to us (which lasted nearly five weeks), he made himself quite at home at

Dalehurst, continually riding over from Forde and spending the whole day, or staying to luncheon, as best suited his convenience. He never gave up the attempt to win my confidence, and sometimes (so desolate and lonely did I feel) I was almost tempted to cast my suspicious dislike to the winds, and treat him with the same cousinly affection that he lavished upon me. If it had not been for the Moretons, I think I must have done so. But I spent part of nearly every day with them, and that sweet, wise intercourse saved me from utter despondency.

Mr. Moreton and I had become very intimate. In those six months I learned thoroughly to appreciate that noble mind and character. Many delightful talks did we have in the pretty Rectory drawing-room, little Rose and Eleanor poring over their lessons or copy-books, and Dorothy lying back on her cushions, her sweet face looking brighter and more animated each day. Sometimes a shade of anxiety would shadow her brightness for a moment. I could not understand it then ; I do now.

What was the natural result of such intercourse, the inevitable end to which such a combination of circumstances must lead? I became attached to Arthur Moreton. Not with the wild, girlish romance, that might have been expected from one of my fervid, enthusiastic nature, but with that deep, steady, abiding, all but adoring affection, which only a perfectly pure heart can give—one which has been unscathed by any other love.

I flattered myself that I succeeded in concealing this love from the world, even from Dorothy. Certainly, I effectually disguised my feelings before *him*; he never guessed that I looked upon him in any other light than that of a kind, sympathetic friend; for, somehow, when in actual contact with Arthur Moreton, one invariably forgot that he was a *young* man, not yet ordained. The depth of his intellect, his calm, sedate manner, his perfect freedom from all the affectations and weaknesses of youth, and his grave, staid appearance, all combined to give one the impression of a much older person. He always seemed to

me at least twenty years older than Sir Edgar.

I do not know how it may be in marriage, but in courtship I believe there is a good deal of truth in Mrs. Malaprop's observation, that it is well to begin with "a little aversion." Certainly, it often happens so in real life. I began by disliking Arthur Moreton most cordially—my "first impressions" (which some people consider of such importance) were anything but favourable : I ended by loving him with my whole heart and soul.

At this time I scarcely seemed to expect or wish that my love should be returned. Ah, *that* feeling came soon enough! But during the six months of which I am speaking, life seemed divided into two distinct parts, one wholly bright and lovable (that which I spent at the rectory), the other lonely and miserable, that which I spent at home. MARCH 30TH, another entry occurs in my diary.

MARCH 30TH.—Mr. Moreton has entered upon his duties as curate of this parish. Only three weeks has he been amongst us,

but a wonderful change for the better has been wrought in the time. He will have no loiterers in his vineyard; all who can work must, and those who cannot, must help in some other way. We have been all half-coaxed, half-commanded, into taking classes at the Sunday School, either in the morning or afternoon. Even Adelaide has succumbed to the universal *furore* for work, unfit as she looks and *is* for anything of the kind. For Adelaide has sadly deteriorated of late. During the last six months we have been seeing a great deal of Captain Astley, and his friendship and influence have certainly not improved either her manner or her appearance. Her pretty golden hair is now *crimped*, and cut square across her forehead; her chignon is three inches higher, and her waist three inches smaller, than any reasonable young lady should care to exhibit; she walks about with her hands in her jacket pockets, extremely short skirts, and high laced-up Balmoral boots. In short, she is rapidly developing into that most odious of created beings, a "Girl of the Period."

Aunt Edith's constitutional languor and indifference have increased so much of late, that she does not notice this alteration in her daughter; and Eugénie, if anything, rather encourages it. As for my uncle, he is reported to be writing a 'History of the Roman Empire,' and is seldom seen out of his study, except at meal-times.

Most strange to say, Captain Astley's admiration for Adelaide seems to increase daily. My opinion of him (never *very* high) becomes lower every day. I think a man who falls in love with a fast girl, is only one step removed from idiocy. It is all very well to laugh and flirt with them, but that is not *marriage*.

Where is the loving heart, the tender, sympathizing spirit, the pure, unselfish mind, in the decked-out, over-dressed young women, yclept "Girls of the Period." Either they do not exist, or are so overlaid with frivolity and vanity, that it will take many years of sorrowful experience to disinter them. What a lot of moralizing! It is all owing to Mr. Moreton. I must give up scribbling, and go to bed.

APRIL 4TH.—This morning Mr. Moreton called, and happening to enter the drawing-room about eleven o'clock, I found him sitting *tête-à-tête* with Laura, discussing some parish business. Was it fancy on my part that there was a slight shade of annoyance on her face as I came into the room? She was looking unusually well this morning. Her dark hair was all coiled up in a massive roll (not plait), and was wound round and round her head in black, silky masses,—a style trying to most faces, but admirably suited to her regular, classical features.

She was nicely dressed too. Her black silk dress and pretty worked collar and cuffs, even the tiny knot of blue ribbon at her throat, were all perfect in their way—neat, suitable, and becoming. I, on the contrary, was clad in an old grey merino, slightly worn at the sleeves, and discoloured in front with stains of yellow-ochre, a reminiscence of my last painting lesson. Somehow I never was dressed well, though I had plenty of money to spend. My dresses never were well made (chiefly because I never would be at the trouble of trying them on); and if it

had not been for Bridget, and continual nagging from Eugénie, I never should have been tidy.

I have observed that men take as much or more notice of dress than women, though in a different way. They look at the general effect, a woman examines the detail. On the present occasion, Mr. Moreton glanced at my untidy collar and rumpled hair with an air of disapprobation (he was always scrupulously neat in his own attire); and I, feeling somewhat aggrieved, threw myself into an easy-chair, and inquired after Dorothy with an independent sort of air, that I could assume when it suited me.

"My sister is much the same," was the grave reply. "She is very busy now, preparing printed hymns and texts for the new Night School."

"Can I be of any assistance?" put in Laura. "I should be so pleased to help."

He looked gratified.

"Thank you, Miss Stuart. There is a great deal to be done. If it would not be trespassing on your time too much, perhaps you would come over to the rectory some

morning. Dorothy can supply you with plenty of work."

"I will come to-morrow," said Laura, graciously.

I glanced suspiciously at her. Whence came this sudden readiness to be of use? It was not usually a salient point in her character to us at home. Meanwhile, Mr. Moreton glanced at me, I thought, wistfully. No doubt he expected me to offer my help, but some stupid feeling of shyness came over me, and I sat silent.

Now Adelaide came into the room, and shook hands with Mr. Moreton, at the same time offering him a bunch of freshly-gathered violets, with that affectation of coquetry which has lately grown on her. He thanked her gravely.

"I am much obliged to you, Miss Adelaide. I am just going to see that poor consumptive girl at the turnpike, and these flowers will be a treat to her."

"You mean to give them away?" exclaimed Adelaide, in high dudgeon.

"You should be obliged to Mr. Moreton for taking your flowers to one to whom

they will be a real pleasure," spoke Laura, reprovingly.

"It is not usual to part with a lady's gift," pouted Adelaide.

In order to cover the extreme bad taste of this remark, and relieve poor Mr. Moreton from his evident embarrassment, I spoke quickly.

"How many more children there were at the school last Sunday afternoon, Mr. Moreton. I really think the number increases every week."

He turned to me with a bright smile.

"If it is so, Miss Hatherleigh, I am greatly indebted, under God, to you and your cousins. Your example has encouraged many others, and the increased attractions of the school have doubtless to do with the increased number of scholars. Poor people like to send their children to be taught by *ladies*."

Here he was interrupted by the irrepressible Adelaide, who whisked herself round from the glass in which she had been attentively contemplating her own charms, and attacked our poor curate in a manner for which he was unprepared.

“Do you dislike the change in my hair, Mr. Moreton? Every one here thinks it fast, but if *you* will say you don’t object, perhaps I shall be allowed my own way for the future. Come, your candid opinion.”

Not a smile crossed Mr. Moreton’s face as he calmly surveyed the amazing structure on the top of Adelaide’s head.

“I cannot say I quite like it,” he said, slowly. “If you wish for my *candid* opinion, Miss Adelaide, I think a lady’s hair should be done as simply as possible. I would leave all those curls and frizettes to hair-dressers and lady’s-maids.”

Adelaide said nothing, but her cheek flushed with mortification, and poor Mr. Moreton seemed to perceive that he had committed an “indiscretion,” as Eugénie would say. He very soon took his departure, and Adelaide scarcely waited till the door was closed behind him before she burst out,—

“What a rude, awkward wretch that man is. What have we done to be cursed with such a *creature* for a clergyman? Did you ever hear of anything so rude?”

"I think it served you quite right, after the egregious way in which you fished for a compliment," said Laura, quietly.

"It is a good thing *every one* is not of Mr. Moreton's opinion," was Adelaide's angry reply: "Captain Astley told me only yesterday that I looked like one of Raphael's cherubs, with these baby curls all over my head."

"I can't imagine one of Raphael's cherubs with fifteen yards of black silk fastened to his waist," I remarked.

"You should put on knickerbockers and a blue tie," observed Laura. "It is a pity that the rest of your body should not match your head."

"You are both very cross and unkind," said Adelaide, hotly. "It is quite certain that no one admires *you*, Laura, with your long nose and *grimy* hair; and as for you, Florence—"

"Don't take the trouble to abuse me," I said, quietly, "I am not worth it." And, not desiring to enter on a wordy war with the excited young lady, I speedily left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

DIARY CONTINUED.

Thou wert my guide, philosopher, and friend.

POPE.

Coming events cast their shadows before.

CAMPBELL.

APRIL 29TH.—This has been a glorious ideal Sunday; the weather perfectly calm and bright, with just enough of spring freshness in the air to remind us that summer is not yet come. As we walked home from morning church, there seemed “a rapturous movement, a green growing,” in all the sunny fields around; pure golden primroses threw a yellow mantle over the hedges, and there was a faint, sweet scent of violets in the air.

All the spring flowers are late this year, on account of the unusual length and severity of the winter; they are all the

more welcome when they come at last. A spring primrose has always appeared to me the most *smiling* of flowers, perhaps because it comes at a time when the whole world is rejoicing in Nature's resurrection, and it is given to all (even the oldest) to feel something of that joyous pulse in our own hearts.

We had a beautiful sermon this morning. Mr. Arthur Moreton preached, and excelled himself in his usual style of fervid eloquence. His preaching is very different to his father's. Dear old Mr. Moreton's key-note is always peace, or comfort, or most gentle admonition; his son's words ring on the ear like a clarion summoning soldiers to the battle, or a trumpet-note proclaiming joy after the victory. They are both most useful and beautiful in different ways. It is given to few country villages to possess two such ministers at one time.

Laura loitered behind the others in the churchyard, in order, as I strongly suspected, that she might walk through the park with Mr. Arthur Moreton. It has become a settled plan that he shall lunch

at Dalehurst on Sunday, as the whole afternoon duty is performed by him, thus leaving his father free to devote the rest of the day to Dorothy. It saves him a long, useless walk, and we all like to see him, with the exception, perhaps, of Adelaide, who finds the grave presence of the young curate a considerable check on her gossiping, *un-Sunday-like* style of conversation.

A hundred little daily occurrences lately have convinced me that Laura is strongly attracted by Arthur Moreton. She never betrays herself in any way—that would be impossible to one of her reserved, haughty nature; but she loses no opportunity of being in his company, and catches up with suspicious eagerness every word that falls from his lips. This morning, however, she was destined to be disappointed.

When we had walked half-way across the park, Aunt Edith desired me to run back to the church with some trivial message for the clerk. I did so, and just as I was again leaving the church, I was joined by Mr. Arthur Moreton, who had been detained in the vestry by his father. Directly Laura

saw this, she turned away quickly, and walked fast towards home till she came up with the others, so leaving us to an undisturbed *tête-à-tête*.

I always enjoyed a talk with Mr. Moreton. He threw off much of his grave austerity of manner when we were alone, and gave me glimpses of a mind "rich and rare" indeed, with its stores of deep learning, and clear, practical lines of thought. To-day, however, he was strangely silent. He did not speak a word after the first greeting from the church-door to the park-gates, but gazed up into the blue sky with a strange, far-away look in his dark eyes, as though he saw some vision in those azure depths not visible to other eyes. I became tired of the silence, and spoke at last.

"Dalehurst looks its very best to-day, Mr. Moreton. Do you not think it a most lovely place?"

"Every one must think so," he answered, warmly. "There is a luxuriance in the foliage here that I have never seen surpassed, even in Devonshire. Look at the tender vivid green of those beech-trees, and

the long, soft shadows creeping up that side of the Down. It is a study for an artist, though no palette could reproduce those innumerable shades of colour, nearly alike, yet so distinct."

"Those beech-trees will make a grand avenue in a few years," I replied. "Uncle John planted them not so very, very long ago. He was saying the other day that another ten years' growth would make them fine trees."

"For those who will see them," he said, half-sadly.

"You may be here in ten years' time," I said. "Why not?"

He smiled. "I doubt if I shall be here in ten month's time."

A cold hand seemed laid on my heart, and I could not prevent myself from starting painfully.

"You do not think of leaving Dalehurst yet, Mr. Moreton?"

"I *do* think most seriously of it. The work here is not sufficient for me. It is mere idling to a young, vigorous man, without tie or hindrance to a nobler, harder

life. Any old, worn-out man could do all I do here, and he would do it better, for he would not be haunted by a constant sense of shortcoming and lazy trifling in the world's vineyard."

"No one could call you idle or trifling, Mr. Moreton," I replied, almost with tears in my eyes. "If you wish for proof of your work, look at this parish,—at the poor people, the schools, the daily services,—and think what it was before you came. Except for 'the honour of the thing,' as the Irishman said, we might almost as well have had no church at all."

"I do not say that you did not require a little shaking up," was his smiling reply. "Now the machine is set in order, the wheels will run smoothly. My father will keep you up to the mark. I do not fear that the parish will be suffered to fall into the old careless indifference about the church and the poor."

"Then you have really decided to leave?"

"By no means. I do not yet see an opening. When I am ready for it, it will come, and I shall see my way clearly. It

will be as God pleases, and when He pleases."

We talked very little after this. Mr. Moreton was silent and abstracted, and I—Well, that poor, impetuous, childish heart of mine was racked with many new and painful feelings. Why should I feel such agony at the thought of Mr. Moreton's departure? Why did I feel that intense, bitter jealousy at the idea of Laura having waited for him? Could it be possible that I, Florence Hatherleigh, the haughty heiress and beauty, had given my heart away unsolicited, and to one who would most assuredly decline the gift?

Even in that moment of agonizing shame (it was no less to my proud young heart) I was true to myself. Yes, I love Arthur Moreton, but no one shall ever know it. After to-day, I will never acknowledge it, even to myself. I will not "wear my heart on my sleeve, for daws to peck at!" Farewell sweet maiden dreams of love and marriage, and a happy home of my *own*, where I should be ever welcomed and cherished. I will lead a quiet, retired,

maiden life at Ladyscourt, the Lady Bountiful of the parish, and eschew the society of men for ever.

Here the Diary ends abruptly in an avalanche of blots, combined with some suspicious-looking marks, which may have been tears.

Oh, foolish, romantic speculations of seventeen, how seldom are they realized! How absurdly improbable they seem when viewed by the light of maturer years, and the cold-hearted wisdom taught by the world. After all, do we gain so very much with the experience acquired by age? *Do we?*

MAY 4TH.—It is very late, but I must spare an hour to chronicle the events of the past day, so unexpected and extraordinary have they been. This morning, about eleven o'clock, as we were sitting in the drawing-room engaged in our usual reading and practising, a sound of horse's hoofs was heard outside, and then a sharp ring at the bell.

We waited in expectation of seeing Captain Astley enter the room, but no one was announced, and Adelaide's curiosity at last

got the better of her honourable feeling, and she went to listen for a moment at the library-door. When she returned, her countenance had fallen considerably.

“It is only Sir Edgar,” she said. “He is talking to papa, but I could not hear a word he was saying.”

We all hazarded various conjectures as to the probable cause of this mysterious private interview. Adelaide had heard there was some talk of the officers at Forde getting up some private theatricals, and thought Sir Edgar must have ridden over to persuade my uncle to allow us to take part in them. Laura thought there might have been some annoyance with the Colonel, which my uncle’s intercessions might smooth over; while Eugénie declared that he had been losing money, and had certainly come to ask for a loan. Strange that amongst four *women*, not one of us came anywhere near the truth in our conjectures, though they must have lasted quite twenty minutes.

At last there were quick steps heard in the hall, sounds of leave-taking, and then horse’s hoofs galloping down the avenue.

Sir Edgar had actually left without asking to see us,—without even taking a glass of wine. What could it all mean?

Far as I was from having any suspicion of the truth, I had a sort of presentiment that the visit concerned me, and I was scarcely surprised when the library-bell rung violently, and I was summoned to my uncle's presence.

I found him in a state of considerable mental perturbation. I guessed this from various unmistakable signs. His thin grey hair, ordinarily brushed carefully over his high brows, was now so rough and untidy as almost to conceal the parting. He had a trick of rumpling and disfiguring himself in this way when at all put out.

On this occasion, his head resembled nothing so much as a very ancient hearth-brush suddenly turned grey with fright, "each particular hair" standing on end. His manuscripts, too, instead of being neatly piled together in chronological order, were scattered all over the table, as though pushed out of place by an irritable, nervous hand. His quill-pen lay unwiped on the hand-

some table-cloth, and his tie was all twisted round to the back of his neck. To some this utter derangement of his usual methodical habits might have afforded amusement, to me it was simply an appalling spectacle.

What could Sir Edgar have been saying to put Uncle John in such an awful state of *fuss*?

My doubts were soon solved. Uncle John cleared his throat, wiped his pen deliberately, and then spoke, taking care, meanwhile, to avoid the full gaze of my eager black eyes.

“My dear Florence, you will, I believe, be surprised at what I have to tell you. You will also, I hope, be gratified. I cannot, however, be so certain of *that*, for young girls are not to be depended upon; their intellect is not generally of a high order; their judgment is unformed—”

Here a quick movement on my part warned him not to try my patience further, and he ended abruptly,—

“Your cousin, Sir Edgar Hatherleigh, wishes to make a proposal of marriage to you.”

"*What?*" I sprang from my seat, and actually stamped my foot. Had Sir Edgar been at hand, I verily believe I should have thrown the inkstand at his head.

"There, my dear child, don't get excited, pray," said my uncle, in an alarmed tone. "If you are so horrified at the idea, we won't say another word. But he is a very well-disposed young man, and baronets don't grow now-a-days on every hedge; and, after all, my dear, it would only be giving the property into right and legitimate hands. The head of the Hatherleigh family ought to have the family estates."

"He may have the estates," I answered, passionately. "I don't care for them; they have brought no happiness to me. But I will not be married to him in order that he may get possession of Ladyscourt. He may have the money, but he shall not have *me*."

Poor, dear Uncle John! how unfit he is to have the care of a family of young girls. Most men would have seen that I was in an excited, almost hysterical state, and that any further argument just then would be

worse then useless. He saw nothing, but went maundering on about the title and the estates, and the advantages of an early marriage for an heiress, till I could stand it no longer. I got up, pushed my chair away from the table, and declared my intention of closing the subject without further argument or delay.

“It must be as you wish, my dear,” returned my uncle, in a plaintive voice. “I don’t wish to force a disagreeable subject upon you. Rather than that—”

“Then *don’t do it*,” I almost shouted, my short stock of patience having come utterly to an end.

“Very well, Florence; very well, my dear, I will say no more. But one word, if you *must* go. Do you happen to remember the exact date of the death of the Emperor Commodus?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Or the year of the accession of Severus? It is somewhere among these notes, but I can’t, at this moment, put my hand upon—”

The rest of this sentence will never be known, for I slammed the library-door with

a noise which echoed through the house, and tore upstairs to my own room. Violent, unlady-like conduct, no doubt; but I was harassed, annoyed, worried beyond description. Surely some excuses may be made for me. I stole downstairs about one o'clock for a biscuit and a glass of wine, and safely regained the solitude of my own room before the others came in to luncheon.

All the afternoon I remained upstairs with my door locked, thinking, thinking deeply. At first I imagined that the matter would be easily settled. Surely, after the scene which had just taken place, I had only to remain passive, and my uncle would write to Sir Edgar declining his offer for me, and I should be rid at once of his disagreeable society, and from any further importunities to marry.

But a little consideration convinced me that I was mistaken. I knew Sir Edgar's indomitable, obstinate character too well to suppose that he would resign without a struggle the object on which he had evidently set his heart, the possession of the

Hatherleigh estates. (Never for a moment did I imagine that his offer had been prompted by any real affection for *me*.)

Then my uncle, weak and undecided as he appeared, could be very pertinacious when he chose, even after he had apparently dismissed a subject. He had evidently set his heart on this marriage, and if I refused Sir Edgar, I knew I had a long series of expostulations, arguments, and complaints before me. *If* I refused Sir Edgar! Had it come to that? Was I actually debating in my own mind the *pros* and *cons* of a step which would have once appeared to me so fearfully repugnant?

Yes. Loneliness, despair, disappointed love, and wounded pride, had actually brought me to this. I began to weigh in my mind the comparative advantages and disadvantages of a union with Sir Edgar. On the one hand, I should escape from Dalehurst—a home which had never been congenial to me, and which had of late become almost insupportably miserable; I should become a rich, independent, titled, married woman; I should live at dear old

Ladyscourt, that never-forgotten, dearly-loved home of my infancy; and, most important of all, I should avoid the possibility of betraying my feeling for Arthur Moreton, and should save myself the pain of bidding him farewell, and witnessing the weary desolation he will leave behind him.

On the other hand, I deprived myself for ever of the chance of a happy, loving, wedded life, and, instead of that, should have Sir Edgar constantly at my side,—the man whom I once detested and feared, and still regarded at times with a dislike approaching to loathing.

Had I but the *faintest*, most shadowy hope that Mr. Moreton would ever care for me, even after long years, I had cast all these considerations to the winds. But I had not, I have not now. No, as he once told Dorothy, his “bride is the Church,” and to her he will faithfully cling through life, until death. No human love will ever come between him and the pure life of self-devotedness he has marked out for himself.

But he spoke to me on Sunday with an open, trustful confidence I do not think he

often shows to others. I shall always like to think of that, though I know it was only the open-hearted candour he thought due to a dear friend of his sister's.

In these sad musings the bright May afternoon passed like magic. I did not feel equal to facing them all at dinner, so Bridget brought me up a cutlet, which I ate to satisfy her, and then began early to prepare for bed. My head was aching painfully, and my eyes were red and stiff with the many tears I had shed. But my trials were not yet over.

About ten o'clock a knock came at my door, and Laura entered, clad in a scarlet dressing-gown, her dark hair hanging loosely over her shoulders. My heart was feeling sorely in need of a little sympathy and love, and I was glad to see her. It seemed to me, in my ignorance, that she *must* have some kind motive for her unusual visit, and I drew the arm-chair forward and gave her a footstool, with a certain sense of comfort. She leaned back on the soft cushions, and looked into my eyes as I sat on a low stool at her feet.

“So, Florence, you have had an offer of marriage!”

I quickly averted my face, and my affirmative answer must have been scarcely audible.

“I hope, dear, you have not finally made up your mind to refuse Sir Edgar?” she continued.

“Do you wish me to accept him?” I said, turning round, and looking her full in the face.

It was her turn to avert her eyes.

“Indeed, Florence, I think you might do worse. Sir Edgar is a very gentleman-like young man, and papa thinks highly of him.”

“If I am to accept a man because he is ‘gentlemanly and young,’” I said, with a bitter little laugh, “I might have as many husbands as the Shah of Persia has wives.”

“Don’t talk in that random way, Florence. Try and exercise a little common-sense for once in your life. I think you should consider papa and mamma a little more than you do. You have been a great trouble and responsibility to them for ten years,

and now a reasonable and suitable offer of marriage is made you, you ought at least to think well before you decline it."

Hard, cruel words. And I had hoped for a little sympathy and love !

"I dare say I have been a great trouble," I murmured. "I wish I could go away to some convent with Bridget, and never be heard of again."

"That is pure nonsense," said Laura, coldly. "I do not say that we want to get rid of you,—you have no right to put that construction on my words; but papa has had a great deal of patience for many years, and—"

"I know—I understand." I hid my face in my hands, and cried bitterly for some minutes. Laura sat silent and still. At last I looked up, my eyes flashing through my tears at a sudden thought which had occurred to me.

"Laura, are you trying to persuade me to marry Sir Edgar because you fear Mr. Moreton may some day care for me?"

She rose with an air of dignity, and walked to the door.

“I have no more to say to you, Florence. You may reject my advice, but you have no right to insult me.”

A sudden revulsion of feeling came over me. I ran to her, and took her cold, impassive hand.

“Oh, Laura, if you would have given me a little love, *only* a little, I would have done anything for you, even this.”

“Do this, and we shall all love you,” she answered, her calm eyes intently watching my poor tear-stained face.

“I will.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

She bent and kissed my cheek, and then turned and left the room.

I am alone now. What have I promised? To what awful life of misery and deceit have I committed myself? I must have been mad. God help me!

Here the Diary ends, and is not continued for several days. The last words are scarcely legible, so blotted and indistinct are they. I could almost shed tears now,

now in my calm, peaceful old age, youth's "fitful fever" long past, when I think of the passionate agony of that girl of seventeen. I had no sympathy on earth, and no comfort in heaven. Poor, impetuous, passionate, but most loving heart; let those cold, repressive natures take warning who would drive such a one to despair.

CHAPTER IX.

ENGAGED TO BE MARRIED.

Of all mad matches never was the like.

Taming of the Shrew.

I HAVE preserved no record of the events of the next few days, but they are retained in my memory with photographic exactness.

The morning after my momentous interview with Laura, I rose (such is the wonderful elasticity of extreme youth), feeling more hopeful and cheerful than I had done the night before. I determined to pluck up courage, and meet the inevitable with decision and promptitude. As Bridget was arranging my hair in the long, thick plaits that were a daily delight to her, but a daily torture to me, I was inwardly debating how I should break to her the astounding fact I had to communicate. Finally, all my studied sentences having been mentally tried over

and 'discarded, I followed the promptings of my nature, and spoke abruptly, and to the point.

“Bridget, I am going to be married to Sir Edgar Hatherleigh.”

The good soul dropped the brush from her hand, and, in the glass, I saw her honest red face change to a pale sickly white.

“The Lord have mercy upon us!” she ejaculated, with as much fervour as if she had seen a ghost. I felt an inward tremor, but tried to laugh it off.

“Why, Bridget, don't look so scared. You ought to be very glad. We shall go and live at Ladyscourt, and it will be like the dear old times come back again.”

“Never, my darling child, never!” cried the faithful old servant, going on her knees beside my chair, and flinging her dear, rough, affectionate arms round my waist. “I can guess why you are going to do this, my dear Miss Florence,—many have done the same to escape from a loveless home; but, oh! it will bring you no

happiness, only misery. What would your dear mother (the Heavens be her portion!) have said, to see you standing at God's altar with a lie in your right hand?"

"What lie, Bridget?"

"The lie of vowing to love and honour a man you detest and despise. Oh, Miss Florence, darling! *don't* be tempted,—don't do it. 'Tis not too late to draw back."

I was more moved by her honest grief than I cared to acknowledge, and, for a moment, I felt half-undecided. Just then a knock came at the door, and Laura appeared (a very unusual piece of condescension on her part), and we went down to breakfast together.

Every one was particularly kind and attentive in their manner to me this morning,—even Eugénie dropped her sharp, sarcastic style of conversation, and Uncle John and Aunt Edith seemed not to know how to make enough of me.

This may partly be accounted for by the strange feeling that causes a mother to find out so many unsuspected good and

valuable qualities in the daughter just “engaged to be married,” but I am willing to think it was partly owing to a remorseful feeling that they had not always behaved as kindly as they ought to have done in the years that were past. I must have been a foolish coward after all, for I dared not—I absolutely *dared* not—declare any alteration in my resolution, and so light a train that would inevitably destroy all this unaccustomed harmony and peace.

After breakfast, Uncle John called me into the library, and informed me that he was glad to understand from Laura that I had had the good sense to re-consider my first refusal of my cousin’s offer. He had no doubt that it would all turn out for my ultimate happiness. Sir Edgar might be expected to ride over early this morning to know his fate—the poor young fellow was naturally very impatient, &c.

I cut the interview as short as I consistently could, in order to escape from the kind words and congratulations that were such a mockery to me. I then went out into the garden, to avoid the curious, expectant

party in the drawing-room, and paced up and down the gravel walk near the shrubberies till the sound of a horse's hoofs was heard in the avenue, and Adelaide soon came running to tell me that Sir Edgar had arrived. I dared not delay; if I was to go at all, I must go at once. So I walked quickly to the house, without waiting to answer any of her eager questions.

I found Sir Edgar alone in the dining-room, standing with his back to the empty fireplace. He came forward as I entered, and took both my hands in his.

"You have made me very happy, Florence," he said. "Let me thank you for giving me a new hope, a new object to live for."

I quietly drew away my hands, and walked to the window, where I stood silently gazing down at the carpet, a posture which I preserved during the whole interview. The pattern of the carpet (sprawling red and white flowers on a shaded green ground) is indelibly impressed on my memory. I never see it now, and

the pattern is a very common one, without the memory of that *mauvais quart d'heure* rising clear and distinct before my mind's eye. Receiving no answer to his affectionate speech, Sir Edgar tried again.

"I have always loved you, Florence, ever since I first saw you, a pretty, wilful little girl at Ladyscourt. I have always—"

I interrupted him.

"We shall understand each other much sooner and better, Sir Edgar, if you will not think it necessary to talk in this strain. I do not in the least expect it. Our marriage (if it is to take place) is simply a matter of convenience to us both. You are poor, and you want Ladyscourt and my eight thousand a year; I am sick of this place and of my life here, and you will take me away from it. I expect no affectionate devotion from you, and I shall give none."

Sir Edgar looked astounded, as well he might. For a moment his cheek flushed painfully, but he soon recovered his presence of mind, and replied gently,—

“You are candid, Florence, you always were; but in this instance you are mistaken as to *my* feelings. I do not say that I could marry a penniless girl—my miserable pittance of an income would make that an impossibility; but I should have loved you in any case, and have tried to induce you to marry me if you had had eight hundred a year instead of eight thousand.”

“I wish you would be candid, Sir Edgar,” I replied, half-impatiently. “I should like you so much better if you did not feel yourself obliged to talk *on stilts* to me. Pray be natural (as I am), and I dare say we shall get on very well. If you persist in talking about love, and all that nonsense, I shall simply hate you.”

“You do me an injustice, Florence,” he said, warmly. “I will not use terms of affection, as they seem to annoy you; but I firmly believe that in time my ardent love will awaken some little return in your own breast. I am content, more than content, for the present, with bare toleration on your part, knowing that the day will

surely come when you will warmly return my love, and be too happy to obey my will in all things."

"I dare say I shall do *that*," was my injudicious reply, "for I know I shall always be horribly afraid of you."

He smiled.

"That feeling may exist for a time, but it will not last. The warm sunshine of my love will melt those hard, bitter thoughts within you. I shall not rest satisfied till I have won your heart's best affections,—till you can look up in my face and say, 'Edgar, my love towards you is so perfect, that it has cast out fear.'"

"I am sorry you should entertain any such impossible hopes," I said, coldly. "It is of no use going over the same ground again and again. Let me tell you once for all, that if there is to be peace between us, and any moderate degree of liking, you must drop all this *twaddle* about affection now and for ever."

"You will vow at the altar to *love* and obey me?" he said, looking steadily into my face.

"Well, I will do my best." And I turned away my head. *There* was the weak point in my harness, and I knew it.

"If you try, you will succeed. That is the kindest thing you have yet said, Florence." And in spite of a momentary, involuntary resistance on my part, he drew me towards him, and touched my forehead with his lips—an authoritative action, a cold, unloving kiss of *appropriation*.

At that moment I seemed to know how he would rule me, not with violence, not by love, but by the steady, irresistible force of a will strong and inexorable as Death.

"Don't do that, please," I said, drawing back quickly. "It is so—so—*disagreeable*."

A flush rose to his brow, but he commanded his temper with a visible effort, and drawing a tiny morocco case from his pocket, he produced a ring, and placed it in my hand. The diamonds flashed in the light, very costly and beautiful they were, but I glanced at them with indifference.

"It is a pity these do not belong to

Adelaide," was my grateful remark. "She is so fond of jewels, and would appreciate these more than I do."

"No doubt she would," replied Sir Edgar, with a light, sarcastic laugh. "But you see, unfortunately, I can't well bestow them on *her*. Let me see them on—there—don't they well become this little hand?"

He seemed about to take it in his; and, greatly fearing a second demonstration of affection, I exclaimed,—

"There is the luncheon-bell. Uncle John hates to be kept waiting. Won't you come?"

I moved quickly to the door, and, opening it suddenly, came upon Eugénie, standing quietly outside. No doubt she had overheard the whole of our conversation. I treated her to a glance of contempt, and, brushing past, ran upstairs into my aunt's bed-room. I found her lying on the sofa, wrapped in a soft grey Indian shawl, her thin cheeks a little flushed.

"This is kind, dear Florence," she said, holding out her hand. "I have been longing to speak a word to you in private; but

I did not feel equal to spending the morning downstairs. My dear child, this news has made me so happy."

"Yes; it seems to have rejoiced you all," I reply, dryly.

Aunt Edith looked a little puzzled.

"You are happy, dear?" she said, anxiously. "You are not doing this merely to please us?"

What was the use of explaining anything to her? Poor weak, good-hearted, incapable soul! She would, probably, have first gone into hysterics if I had told her the truth, and then fretted herself into a nervous fever. So I took her poor, trembling hand in mine, and spoke soothingly, as one does to a child.

"Dear aunt, it is all right; don't be anxious. Sir Edgar seems inclined to be very — very — *civil*, and I feel sure we shall get on very well together—very well indeed."

She gave a little sigh of relief, and sank back on her pillow.

"I am so glad to hear you say that, dear child. This house is but a dull home

for you; you will lead a brighter, happier life with Sir Edgar at Ladyscourt."

"Yes, dear aunt, of course. Shall I send you any luncheon?"

"A tiny bit of chicken, dear, please, and a morsel of salad. And be sure, Florence, that my sherry is half water; it was too strong yesterday."

"Very well, aunt, I will see to it;" and I left the room.

Downstairs I found Sir Edgar busily engaged in appropriating the choicest bits off a plump young fowl, under cover of an animated discussion with Adelaide. I felt a mean joy in defeating his purpose by desiring him to pass on the plate of carefully-selected tit-bits for my aunt's luncheon.

He left us very early in the afternoon, on plea of military duty; and on parting I had to submit to another odious kiss. I straightway rushed to my own room, and bathed the outraged cheek with eau-de-Cologne and water. Later in the afternoon there was no escaping from Adelaide, who followed me to my own room, and ensconced herself comfortably at the end of the sofa,

on which I was lying down to rest my hot, aching head.

"Now don't look cross and disagreeable, Florry," she said, coaxingly. "I want so much to hear all about it; so do tell me, like a dear, good girl."

"All about what?" was my inconsequent answer.

"Oh, you know—your engagement; and what Sir Edgar said, and what you said, and what he said back again, and all the rest of it. Make haste and begin, I am *dying* to hear."

"I have nothing to tell you, Adelaide—nothing, at least, that you would be interested to know."

"But I should be interested to hear *everything*. Oh, Florence, what a ring," as a turn of my hand brought the glittering stones into full view. "It must have cost quite fifty pounds."

"I dare say it did; I did not inquire the price. I wish you would let me rest for a little while, Addie, my head is very bad."

"Is it? Poor thing, I'm so sorry! I

won't bother you much. But, Florry, just tell me this one thing, for it has been puzzling me all the morning, when did you *begin* to care for Sir Edgar? for it seems to me that you abused him and laughed at him up to the very moment of your engagement. It is altogether the oddest affair. I can't understand it in the least, nor can Eugénie."

"I wish Eugénie would mind her own business," I answer, sharply, "and not trouble herself to talk about mine. She always was an interfering thing."

"It is of no use to say that, though it may be quite true," returned Adelaide, meditatively. "People *will* talk, and you can't hinder them, if you do extraordinary things. There is one thing to comfort you, no one can say you marry for money. It is a pretty title, Lady Hatherleigh; how soft it sounds! It is much prettier than Mrs. Astley."

"What rubbish you talk, Adelaide," I reply, with languid weariness. "Pray, have you been asked to take the name of Astley?"

“No, but I soon shall be.” She broke off suddenly, and actually sat silent for a minute or two.

I opened my heavy eyes, and glanced at her as she sat there, the brilliant afternoon sunshine falling on her pretty face and sunny hair. She looked a creature of life, and joy, and sunshine. Surely misfortune itself would turn away subdued by such brilliant, *happy*-looking loveliness as hers. My heart slowly filled with a bitter feeling of envy. Why should all the misery fall to my share, all the happiness to hers? Why should my seventeen years be loaded with such bitter trials and crosses, while *her* life lay stretched out before her bright and unclouded?

Of course, she would marry Captain Astley (not that I envied her *that*), but he was her choice,—the man on whom she had fixed her heart’s best affections; of course, he would return her love; and, of course, they would be married, and live happy ever after. It would all end like a fairy tale; while I— The bitter sense of injustice and misery was too much for

me; I buried my head in the pillow, and burst into tears. Adelaide looked up in amazement.

“Crying, Florence? What is the matter? Is your head so very bad? No? Well, you are the most incomprehensible girl. Just engaged to be married, and now sobbing as if you had been condemned to live and die an old maid!”

I tried hard to control myself, but it was impossible, and I became almost hysterical. Adelaide began to lose patience.

“For mercy’s sake don’t cry like that, Florence,” she exclaimed; “people will think that you are not happy, that you don’t care for Sir Edgar, or that we have forced you into the marriage, or something equally pleasant.”

“I wish you would let me be alone for an hour, Adelaide,” I said, raising my head, and speaking with difficulty. “I—I—think I am not very well.”

She rose at once, perhaps not sorry to escape under the circumstances.

“You are over tired and excited,” she said; “I will send you a cup of tea.”

She left the room, and I gave way unrestrainedly to my grief, until the stupor of utter exhaustion crept over me. Nature's sweetest medicine, sleep, came to my relief, and for a time, at least, my weary, aching brain found rest and peace.

CHAPTER X.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

Is there no pity sitting in the clouds,
That sees into the bottom of my grief?

* * * * *

Delay this marriage for a month, a week."

Romeo and Juliet.

THE first fortnight of my engagement passed off more peaceably than might have been anticipated. Sir Edgar did not ride over from Forde every day, or even every other day, as he might well have done. Had he played the ardent, impatient lover in this fashion, he would soon have worn out my patience, and he knew it. He appeared about twice a week, sometimes only once, and, on the whole, conducted himself towards me with much tact and consideration. He was playing for a heavy stake, and it behoved him to be cautious.

Never again (to my unspeakable relief)

did he attempt any affectionate familiarity, either in public or in private. To be sure he had not many opportunities, for I privately entreated my cousins never to leave us quite alone together, affirming (to Aunt Edith's great amazement) that a *three tête* was much nicer than a *tête-à-tête*.

But these halcyon days did not last long. Our first quarrel took place on a lovely May morning, about three weeks after our engagement. Only Laura was in the room: she was drawing in her favourite seat near the window, and Sir Edgar was standing near, criticizing her performance, for he affected to be a good judge of water-colours. Suddenly he looked up and said,—

“Before you become Lady Hatherleigh, Florence, we must look out for a good French or German maid. I think I will ask Lady Hunter to inquire for you.”

“I don't want a foreign maid,” I replied, quickly. “I could not bear any one to wait on me but Bridget.”

“It is time you had a different style of person about you,” he said, coldly. “A vulgar Irishwoman like that may have done

very well as nurse to a baby, but I should dislike to have any servant of that stamp at Ladyscourt."

"Don't say a word against Bridget," I exclaimed, angrily. "She is the best friend I ever had, or am ever likely to have; and I love her better than anybody in the whole world. If you won't have her at Ladyscourt, you won't have me, for I decline to come without her."

He smiled, that calm, provoking, superior smile.

"Your warm feelings do you honour, Florence, but they should not be carried too far. I do not propose that you should entirely cast off your faithful old servant. Allow her a small pension if you choose, say twenty pounds a year, and, if you wish to be very munificent, let her have one of your cottages at Ladyscourt rent free."

"You cannot object to that, Florence," put in Laura. "It is a most liberal proposal."

"But I can and do object to it," I replied, with heightened colour and raised voice.

Here Eugénie entered the room, and stood still in amazement, while I went on,—

“I will not be dictated to in this manner, Sir Edgar. Ladyscourt is mine, and not yours; and it is for me to settle who shall live in that house, and not for you.”

“Ciel!” exclaimed Eugénie, throwing up her hands and eyes. “Never did I expect to hear such sentiments. Florence, Florence, you are beside yourself.”

“Perhaps we had better finish this discussion in private,” said Sir Edgar, striving hard to preserve his temper, though his cheeks were pale with anger. “Will you come into the garden, Florence?”

“No,” I replied, casting an ireful glance at him. “I decline to discuss the question at all. Bridget is my dear friend and servant, and as long as I am alive she shall remain with me.”

“I am sorry you take this matter so to heart,” he replied, in a would-be conciliatory tone of voice. “I had no intention of annoying you, Florence, but you are very easily put out. Talking to you is like walking on the thin crust of a volcano—one is liable to a fiery outburst at any moment.”

But I did not intend to be either laughed

or coaxed into the renewal of a question so distasteful to me; and, in spite of various admonitory looks and hints from Laura and Eugénie, I went to my own room, and remained in that safe sanctuary till I saw Sir Edgar's chestnut steed convey his master safely away. I knew a scolding awaited me downstairs, so I determined to avert, or, at least, postpone it, till I had taken my usual morning's ride. As I was dressing, a pencilled note from Sir Edgar was brought to my door. The contents were as follows:—

“Strictly confidential.

“MY DEAREST FLORENCE,

“As you will not even come to say good-bye, I fear I have deeply offended you. Let me plead, in self-defence, that I know nothing personally of your old nurse (how should I?); nor should I have introduced the subject, if it had not been for a decided and unmistakable hint from your cousin Laura, that she was not a fit person to act as your confidential servant. Pray let this make no unpleasant feeling between you and your cousin. I am persuaded that she acted for

the best, and you need not fear that the subject will ever again be renewed. I shall hope to see you to-morrow.

“Yours ever,

“E. H.”

I crushed the tiny note in my hand with an expression of anger too strong for me to own to, even at this distance of time. Cruel Laura, what had I ever done to her that she should seek to destroy my happiness in this persistent manner? Not satisfied with having secured my marriage to a man I detested (for if it had not been for those cold, heartless words of hers my engagement had never taken place), she would seek to rob me of my best and dearest friend, my faithful old nurse. Why this vindictive enmity towards me? for such it appeared in that first angry moment.

Looking back at this distance of time on the state of affairs in our family, I can see that Laura's conduct is accounted for. She hated me, chiefly because she feared that I was a dangerous rival, not only as regarded Mr. Moreton, but in society at

large. Her proud, secretive nature betrayed no pang of jealousy, but the poisonous feeling was there, steadily undermining any kindly feeling she might ever have entertained towards me.

Well, she had obtained her desire. Surely she must see with satisfaction that every humiliation I had ever brought upon her by my fatally superior attractions was now deeply avenged. I was in the power of a man I hated, and who assuredly bore me no love in return. It did not require a powerful imagination to conceive what my future life must be, how dark and dreary the prospect that lay before me.

Well, after all, revenge is not so sweet a morsel as we imagine. Was Queen Elizabeth a very happy woman, think you, when she finally determined to banish Essex from her heart for ever, and signed the death-warrant that caused that comely head to be laid on the block? Do you suppose that she ever attended joust or tournament again without seeing that noble form constantly before her, those proud, sad, reproachful eyes coming for ever between

her and all happiness and mirth? It is an extreme case to quote, but it partly illustrates Laura's feeling towards me.

She was not sufficiently depraved to feel thoroughly happy in her revenge. Some days she even conducted herself towards me with a kind of remorseful tenderness; at other times the same feeling seemed to goad her into acts of fresh animosity, such as this attack on poor old Bridget.

To return to my story. As I passed through the hall in my riding-habit, Eugénie came out from the drawing-room, and stopped me.

"One word, Florence," said she. "Do you intend to write to Sir Edgar?"

"No; of course not. Why should I? He will be here again to-morrow."

"But figure to yourself the embarrassment if you meet him before you have made any *amende* for this morning's conduct."

"If any apology is needed," I replied, haughtily, "it should come from Sir Edgar, and not from me."

I swept past her, mounted my horse, and rode away before she had sufficiently re-

covered her presence of mind to detain me. I determined to ride to the Rectory, and see Dorothy. I had neither seen nor heard anything of her since my engagement. I had looked daily for the loving, congratulatory note that might have been expected, but it never came. It was the more strange because Laura had lost no time in acquainting Mr. Moreton with the change in my position, so that ignorance could not be pleaded as an excuse for what seemed like cold-hearted indifference. Once I had caught sight of Mr. Moreton in the village, but he turned into a cottage before we actually met, as if purposely to avoid me. It was all very mysterious, and I resolved to know the truth at once.

I saw Dorothy in her bath-chair on the lawn as I rode into the Rectory garden, but, seeing me, she evidently told little Rose to help her into the house, and I found her safely located in the drawing-room. She received me kindly, but without the bright, loving smile I had learnt so to prize; for it was a greeting reserved for her most favoured friends.

“It is a long time since you have paid me a visit, Florence,” she said. “I thought we were never going to see you here again.”

I sat down on a low chair by her side, and replied in a tone which I endeavoured should sound natural and unconstrained.

“I have had a great deal to do, dear Dorothy; my time is not always at my own disposal, and I have been hoping daily to hear from you.”

She looked into my face with a strangely sad expression in her beautiful blue eyes.

“I will be candid with you, Florence,” she said; “for I know you would prefer it. I could not write to congratulate you, for you are about to take a step which all your true friends must strongly disapprove of.”

I listened silently, with bent head and flushed cheeks. She glanced at me, and went on in a kinder tone of voice, laying her hand on my shoulder.

“We have not known you very long, dear Florence, and yet you seem like an old friend to us. Let me speak plainly to you. You are going to take a step which

will ruin all your future life, and though you may be pardoned in the next world (if repentance comes to you here), in this your hopes of happiness will be extinguished for ever."

"You are very harsh, Dorothy," I murmured. "You make no allowances for the circumstances in which I am placed. I lead a wretched life at Dalehurst, *that* would account in many people's eyes for my wish to leave it and be independent; but there are other reasons, reasons which even you would think weighty and powerful, but I cannot speak to you of them."

She replied, solemnly,—

"No reason can exist, Florence, which can justify you in committing perjury at the altar of God. You have told me quite lately of your dislike and dread of Sir Edgar; can it be possible that you now seriously think of taking him for a husband, one who should be your pride, stay, and support through life, the man whom you must vow to 'love, honour, and obey,' and who will have a right to expect the most perfect devotion and

submission from you till death ends the weary bondage?"

I slid from my chair, buried my face in the shawl that covered Dorothy's feet, and burst into bitter, irrepressible tears. That loving heart soon melted.

"Poor little Florence," she said, soothingly, "you are but a child after all. Do not cry like this; you have done nothing irretrievable as yet; there is still time to act openly and honourably."

I looked up with wet checks, and dark, scared eyes.

"I cannot retract now, Dorothy; I have given my word; I am *engaged*; all the world knows it. Nothing can part me from him unless he would commit some horrible crime, and he is too wise for that. There is no hope for me—none."

I do not know what her answer would have been, for at this moment the door opened abruptly, and Arthur Moreton entered the room. He walked to his sister's couch, and placed an open letter in her hand, saying, briefly, "I have accepted it." He then passed through the open window

into the garden without having noticed me.

In that moment I had seen how pale and thin his cheeks were, and how his sad eyes seemed to have lost all their native brilliancy and fire. Dorothy read the letter through once—twice, without a word of apology to me (she who was usually so observant of these little courtesies), and then she sank back on her pillows, and gave the letter into my hand, saying, faintly,—

“I have heard something of this. Read it Florence, it will interest you.”

I took the letter and read it over several times before I could fully apprehend its meaning, and yet it was simple enough. It contained a few lines from the Bishop of ———, in Africa, stating that he was about to sail very shortly for his distant diocese, and being in need of a young chaplain, was anxious to know if Mr. Moreton would be desirous of accepting the post. My heart seemed to stop beating as I looked up into Dorothy's face, and saw no gleam of hope there.

“Dorothy,” I exclaimed, “you will not

let him go; he cannot *mean* to leave you all."

"You heard what he said."

"But the terrible climate, the savages, the rough, dangerous life."

She bent forward with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, none the less brilliant for the tears that filled them.

"Florence, if you had a brother in the army, would you wish him to retire when his regiment was called into active service? Would you not rather bid him go, in God's name, and fight bravely, and, if need be, die bravely, for a good cause?"

I looked up hopelessly into the beautiful, enthusiastic face.

"You may think so *now*, Dorothy, but you forget the long days and months, and years to come, when you will miss him who has been more than a brother to you—your 'own familiar friend.' Can you bear to think of that long weary separation?"

"It is all true," she answered, in a low voice from which all the excitement had died away. "If he goes, I feel that I shall never see him again. But I can see

God's hand in the whole matter. He longed for a more difficult, more glorious, line of duty, and his longing will be granted. I used to dream of a quiet, peaceful, little parsonage for him, where we should live in future years, and never be parted. But these noble spirits are not to be so restrained, and he knows England is no fit place for him now. He will be happier far away from it."

The last part of this speech was enigmatical to me. I asked, anxiously,—

"What do you mean, Dorothy? Why is England no 'fit place' for your brother?"

Her face had been turned away from me, but now she looked round, and gazed steadily into my eyes.

"I think I will tell you," she said, "though I fear I ought not. Still, I shall not repent of it if I can save you from committing a great crime. Arthur loves you, Florence—loves you with all the force of his pure, unselfish nature. As long as he remains in England, your memory will haunt him, and stand between him and the

peaceful happiness he has every right to enjoy."

She spoke in abrupt, broken sentences, her breath coming fast and painfully. I sat still for a moment, absolutely petrified with amazement (shall I add *joy*?), and then throwing myself on my knees beside Dorothy's sofa, I forgot all my pride, every consideration of maidenly dignity and reserve, every motive that should have compelled me to keep silence, and exclaimed,—

"Dorothy, dear Dorothy, I love him too—oh, so dearly! Don't let him go to Africa; or, if he will go, let me go with him. You will speak to him, you will persuade—"

She interrupted my wild, incoherent speech, and laid her cool hand gently on my burning forehead.

"I guessed this, dear Florence; but you have only heard half my story: now you must hear all. I had thought I noticed signs that you were not indifferent to Arthur, and I actually told him so. We have had many happy talks together about you. But one morning—now three weeks ago—he came to me and said, very quietly

(but, oh, if you had seen how heart-broken he looked!),—

“ ‘ I am rightly punished, Dorothy. My idol has been taken away from me—has proved, after all, no better than other women. Miss Hatherleigh is going to sacrifice herself, for the sake of freedom and position, to a man wholly unworthy of her—a man she despises. She is going to marry Sir Edgar Hatherleigh!’ ”

“ Shocked as I felt, I tried to make excuses for you, Florence. I pleaded your youth, your melancholy position, and, above all, the coldness which had always marked *his* behaviour towards you. But to all this he answered,—

“ ‘ *My* Florence would have died sooner than so degrade herself. Never speak of her again, Dorothy; the pure, high-minded girl I loved never really existed. Never speak of her again. Let her be dead to you, as she will be dead to me.’ ”

Oh, the bitter shame and remorse that wrung my poor childish heart! Dorothy's words carried conviction with them, yet I determined to make one more effort, though

at the sacrifice of the last shred of womanly pride that remained to me.

“Would it make no difference, Dorothy, if he *knew* that I cared for him,—that I was *glad* to give up Sir Edgar for his sake?”

“None,” she answered, sadly. “He has put his hand to the plough, and he will *not* look back. Only for a short time did an earthly love hold possession of his soul; he will stamp it out now by every means in his power.”

I hid my face for a few minutes, and then looked up, and spoke as resolutely and firmly as my bitter, shameful tears would allow.

“All you said to me this morning is true, but it would not have availed without this. God helping me, I swear never to marry Sir Edgar Hatherleigh!”

CHAPTER XI.

DARK DAYS.

This morn is merry June, I know,
The rose is budding fain ;
But she shall bloom in winter snow
Ere we two meet again.

SCOTT.

I ROSE the next morning with a sensation of freedom and relief to which I had long been a stranger. Never for an instant had I wavered in the determination I had announced to Dorothy. In spite of my relatives, in spite of the world, in spite of Sir Edgar's indomitable will, I had made up my mind to be free. I would enter into no marriage that would render it a sin to think of the only man I loved in the world, now that I *knew* that he loved me, even though he was lost to me for ever by my own sinful weakness and pride.

I resolved to say nothing to the others, determining to speak first to Sir Edgar. I had not long to wait. About eleven o'clock he arrived, and, to prevent his being shown into the drawing-room, I met him in the hall, and asked him to give me a few minutes' private conversation. He assented at once, no doubt thinking I had something to say about Bridget.

When we were both safely in the dining-room, he took my hand, and said, with a pleasant smile,—

“We do not often have a private interview, Florence. May I hope that after all you are beginning to like me a little, or is this simply an affair of business?”

I withdrew my hand, and spoke quickly and abruptly, as was my wont when somewhat excited.

“Sir Edgar, I am not clever at beating about the bush—I have no tact; and all I can do is to speak the truth simply. What I am going to say will astonish you very much, the more because I can give you no good reason for it. A circumstance came to my knowledge yesterday which has en-

tirely altered my plans. I wish to tell you that our engagement must be at an end, for I can never marry you ! ”

There was a dead silence in the room for several moments, it seemed to me like half an hour. When I ventured to look up at him, I saw that my cousin's face had changed to a deadly white, or rather *grey*, and his light-blue eyes were fixed on my face with an expression full of bitterest malevolence, which made my blood run cold. When, at last, he spoke, his voice seemed changed ; it had lost all its oily softness, and sounded hoarse and thick.

“ I suppose I ought not to be much surprised at this, but I never thought to have to accuse a Hatherleigh of dishonour.”

I replied, humbly,—

“ I deserve all that you can say to me. I know I have behaved shamefully to you—*most* shamefully ; but it is not of much use for us to quarrel about it, is it ? After all (and I tried to look up in his face and speak cheerfully)—after all, I am no great loss. I never pretended to love you, and I never *should* have loved you. There is

nothing particular to recommend me except my money; I am very short, and I have a horrid temper, and I am not very strong. As for money, when I come of age I will do anything I can for you. You have only to mention—”

He cut me short.

“Your generosity is quite Quixotic, my fair cousin; I regret that I cannot emulate it. I understand from you that you have some mysterious, unexplained reason for desiring to break off your engagement, and cancel all the promises you have made to me at different times. Very good. But I on *my* side refuse to allow you to resume your freedom or retract your vows. You are mine—mine by many promises, mine by the opinion of the world, mine by the consent of your guardians, mine by reason of the great love I bear you. Do not seek to break loose, for you will find it impossible.”

He thought to frighten me, but our haughty family spirit rose proud and undaunted at this assumption of unrighteous tyranny.

“You are talking nonsense, Sir Edgar, and you must know it. A woman is always at liberty to take back her word, aye, even at the steps of the altar, if circumstances should arise to justify her in doing so. It is true that I promised to marry you, but dishonourable as it is to break one’s word in general, it would be *worse* than dishonourable for me now to fulfil it.”

“You talk in riddles,” he answered, with a sneer. “But perhaps I know more of the matter than you suppose. I have to thank that young sneak of a parson for this.”

“You need not abuse him,” I said, quickly; “and you need not be jealous of him. He sails for Africa in a few weeks, as chaplain to the Bishop.”

“And may I ask if you propose to sail with him?”

“No,” I answered, sadly and gently; “he will never marry.”

“There’s no knowing when an heiress is in the question; these parsons generally have a keen eye to the main chance.”

“Not more so, perhaps, than some laymen,” I replied, quietly.

His eyes flashed fire ; he looked positively dangerous ; and I (little coward as I was) hastened to utter some soothing words."

"Perhaps, Sir Edgar, the day may come when you will inherit Ladyscourt without having me as a necessary incumbrance. You are the next heir, and I may die any day."

"Not very likely," he answered, roughly. "You are seventeen, and have never had a day's serious illness."

I did not heed the brutality of this remark. My eyes were fixed on the fair, distant prospect seen from the windows, and I said, dreamily,—

"It does not seem right that you should have been left with so little. It has all been very unjust towards you—very unfair."

"Remedy the injustice," he said, quickly. "Be my wife. Florence, I swear to you that you shall never repent it."

I was such a child, I was so weak, so helpless, and just then so filled with a sort of remorseful pity for the unfortunate young man by my side, that I might have yielded ; but at that moment, strange to say, Arthur

Moreton happened to cross the park. I saw him clearly from the window—saw his tall, noble, upright figure, and could even distinguish the outlines of his features. I saw him turn once, and gaze steadily at our house; so steadily and so long did he look, that I forgot the distance that separated us, and shrank back from the window for fear he should see me. That sight decided me. I turned to Sir Edgar, and said, firmly,—

“Any other favour you ever ask of me I will grant, but I cannot consent to be your wife. Our engagement is at an end.”

I drew the diamond ring from my finger, laid it on the table, and quitted the room before he could stop me. On the stairs I met Laura. She was carefully carrying a basketful of flowers; but there must have been something in my face which startled her, for she let half of them fall as she caught sight of me, and exclaimed,—

“What is the matter, Florence; are you ill?”

“I am quite well, thank you,” I answered; and then added, abruptly, “I have broken

off my engagement with Sir Edgar; will you tell the others?"

I would have passed her, but she caught my hand and held it tight.

"This is not true, Florence,—it *can't* be true. You have had a quarrel, perhaps, but it can be made up again."

I replied, with a composure that I did not feel, when I saw her dark eyes flashing,—

"No, this will never be made up again."

"This has something to do with Mr. Arthur Moreton," she exclaimed. "Florence, you cannot deny it."

"Don't bring his name into the matter," I replied, wearily; "he will be far enough away soon."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that in a few weeks he will sail as a missionary to Africa. I heard it yesterday from Dorothy."

She gazed at me for a moment with dark, dilated eyes, then, without cry or warning, the basket of flowers fell from her nerveless hand, and she sank down

on the stairs, motionless, inanimate, powerless as a corpse.

I preserved my presence of mind, and resolved not to alarm the household unless it should be absolutely necessary. I tried to drag her to the broad, old-fashioned window-seat in the hall, and, at last, by dint of almost superhuman exertion (for she was tall and heavy, and I little better than a child in strength), I succeeded. There she lay, looking as like death as anything that can be conceived. The finely-cut features were like marble for whiteness and coldness, the dark eyes were barely shut, the soft, smooth hair was hanging all rough and dishevelled.

I knelt down beside her, and chafed the icy hands, and, opening the window, let in the soft cool breeze to blow upon her; but it only stirred her hair and ruffled the ribbons of her dress, it did not help to revive her. As I loosened the front of her dress, a tiny note fell out, which had evidently been treasured carefully near her heart. I recognized Arthur Moreton's large, bold handwriting; doubtless it was

one of the short notes she occasionally received from him on parish matters. Poor Laura! she must love him well so to treasure this scrap of paper for his sake!

I carefully replaced the note inside her dress, and, alarmed at the length of her swoon, was just about to summon assistance, when she sighed gently, and opened her eyes. In another moment, her indomitable strength of mind overcame her weakness of body, she sat up, and said, in a low, dreamy voice,—

“What were you telling me, Florence? That you had quarrelled with Sir Edgar? Is it true?”

“Yes, dear Laura, we are parted; but pray don’t try to talk. I will tell you everything if you will rest quiet a few minutes.”

She paid no attention to my advice, but, fixing her eyes on me with a mournful earnestness which reached my heart, and went far to remove the angry feelings I had nourished towards her, she said,—

“You told me Mr. Moreton was going away—to Africa,—is *that* true?”

“Quite true.”

She remained silent for a few minutes, her head leaning on her hand, and then rose, saying,—

“I will go and lie down in my own room; the hot sun in the garden has been too much for me, I suppose. I shall be all right after an hour’s rest.”

It was the 1st of June, but by no means a warm day, and the sun had not been visible all the morning; but I let her imagine that she deceived me, and offered my arm to help her up the stairs.

“No, thank you,” she said; “I shall do very well now. I am much obliged to you, Florence, for not alarming the whole house, as most girls would have done. I should have hated to have them all coming fussing about me.”

She went to her room, and I walked to the library, and there announced to my uncle the change in my intentions concerning Sir Edgar. He heard what I had to say with surprising calmness; indeed, I was greatly astonished at the very small sensation the rupture of my engagement created

in our small household. Of course my aunt cried a little, Eugénie sneered, and Adelaide was inquisitive and tiresome; but, on the whole, considering the trouble that had been taken to promote the match, they all treated its failure with wonderful equanimity. In truth, they were all much occupied with other matters.

Aunt Edith was daily growing weaker and weaker. We had so long attributed all her complaints and attacks to *nerves*, that we were slower than most people would have been to perceive this. She was always very gentle, very uncomplaining,—life seemed slipping away from her without a struggle to retain it. I read a little every day to her, and did my poor best to lighten the many hours of dreary solitude she was obliged to spend in her own room.

Three days after the rupture of my engagement, Captain Astley proposed for Adelaide. His statement of his affairs was not altogether so satisfactory as might have been desired; but Uncle John was too much absorbed in his “Roman Emperors” to take very much trouble about the

matter, and the young people got their own way without much difficulty. Adelaide was very happy, and her engagement seemed to have the effect of softening her a good deal. She was less flighty in her manner, less *slangy* in her conversation, and quieter and more lady-like in her dress and behaviour.

As for Laura, she “ganged like a ghaist” about the house,—colder, more reserved, more impenetrable than ever; taking very little interest in anything except her work in the parish, which she performed with an untiring energy, that threatened to injure her health.

Sir Edgar by no means considered himself banished from the house, though our engagement was avowedly at an end, and the few wedding presents I had received were all returned. I found it possible to treat him with civility now that I was no longer bound to him; but I disliked to see him so constantly about the house, and wondered at his bad taste in intruding upon us so often. Strange to say, the person whose society he now seemed most to affect

was Eugénie. I discovered that they sometimes held long private conversations together, which were hastily broken off if one of us entered the room. Laura was too miserable and Adelaide too absorbed to notice this; and I cared too little about either of them to let their unaccountable intimacy cause me an anxious thought. It was certainly very odd; and if Eugénie had been a little less sallow, vinegar-faced, and middle-aged, I should have thought that my cousin had transferred his attentions to her.

Of my own feelings during this time I need say little. They can be imagined. Remorseful and humiliating as they often were, I was yet happier than I had been during my engagement with Sir Edgar. At any rate, I *had* been thought worthy of the love of the best man I had ever known, and that was something, even though it was now lost to me for ever. No doubt a mournful life lay before me. I might grieve and “go softly” all my days for the remembrance of that lost, early love, and yet—Well, my thoughts and hopes were sometimes

too foolish, too wildly improbable to be recorded here. It was a matter of daily congratulation to me that I had escaped from Sir Edgar's power. Ah! I little knew with whom I had to deal.

So the days rolled away till the last Sunday arrived which Mr. Moreton was ever to spend at Dalehurst. I had never seen him since the morning he had so opportunely crossed the park opposite the dining-room window. I think he must have contrived to avoid me; for I had been often in the village, and had once called at the Rectory. His farewell sermon was very brief; only a few strong, earnest words, exhorting us to continue in the many good works so lately set on foot in the parish, and never to relax in our endeavours to ameliorate, morally and physically, the condition of the poor around us, till we should all meet in a happier place, where such exertions would be no longer needed.

I might record every word of that noble sermon; but the mere *words* would tell so

little. I could not reproduce the fire, the earnestness, the *love* with which he spoke, which filled our eyes with tears, and sent many away softened and weeping who had only come to church out of idle curiosity. Though he had been so short a time with us, he had gained a strong hold on the affections of the people, many of whom mourned for him as for a son or brother.

On Tuesday he came to take leave of us. I saw him approach from the drawing-room window, and managed to leave the room and get out into the garden unperceived. I *could* not bid him farewell before three pair of curious, unfriendly eyes; though *one*, I knew, would be too much occupied in restraining her own feelings to notice mine. So I walked quickly down the shrubbery path, and stationed myself at the little gate, through which I knew he would pass on his return to the Rectory. A demonstrative, unladylike proceeding, you will say. Perhaps so; but such thoughts had no place in my mind just then. I only felt that I must see him once more in private; must

receive his last farewell, and feel the last clasp of his hand *alone*, cold and unsatisfactory though I knew both would be.

I had not long to wait, not more than twenty minutes, though it seemed like hours to me. At last I heard his quick, decided step on the gravel. I waited till I was certain he had turned into the shrubbery-path, and could not avoid meeting me, and then walked slowly forward. He probably thought I had just returned from a walk, and as he shook hands he said, with something like a gleam of pleasure in his eyes,—

“I am glad to have met you, Miss Hatherleigh. I feared that I was about to leave Dalehurst without wishing you good-bye.”

“When do you leave?” I asked, in what I flattered myself was an indifferent tone.

“To-morrow, very early,” he replied. “This is the last evening I shall spend at Dalehurst.”

“You are not very sorry to leave,” I

said, half reproachfully ; “ and yet you have made many friends here.”

His eyes met mine for an instant ; then he looked away, and answered sadly,—

“ I do not know that I *am* very sorry. But I shall have pleasant memories of this quiet place, and of many of its inhabitants—memories that will be very comforting in that wild, burning country I am going to.”

Cold, conventional words ; but there was a tone in his voice that was neither cold nor conventional. I felt that my self-possession was rapidly forsaking me. Leaning on the little gate, I looked up in his calm, grave face, and said, earnestly,—

“ You have not considered your sister in this arrangement, Mr. Moreton ; you have not thought what this separation will be to her. I do not know how she will live without you.”

“ She will grieve at first,” he replied ; “ but I am not afraid that it will injure her health. Hers is too chastened, too *faithful*, a spirit for that. And you will be

her friend, Miss Hatherleigh. I shall like to think of that. You—you are not going to leave Dalehurst now?"

"No."

"I am glad of it," he said, simply. "I believe a happier life lies before you than the one you would have chosen. I must not delay you, it is getting very late."

He took my hand, but did not release it at once, and I—I looked up in his face imploringly, beseechingly, forgetting the composure to which I had schooled myself, and said, in a voice half-strangled in tears,—

"It is good-bye, we shall never see you again."

He was not looking at me; his eyes were fixed on the western heavens, where the gorgeous sunset-clouds had piled themselves in strange fantastic shapes, to a fanciful eye resembling the towers and pinnacles of some far-off celestial city.

"If not again here, we shall meet *there*. Good-bye, *Florence*."

Our hands parted, and he walked quickly away. I watched him till the tall form was

lost to sight among the towering shrubs, and then I laid my head down on the little green gate in such utter abandonment of misery as I trust few girls of my age have ever felt. So I was rid of *all* my lovers.

CHAPTER XII.

SIR EDGAR'S LAST HOPE.

“’Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but ’tis enough.”

Romeo and Juliet.

DIARY resumed.—JUNE 8TH.—It is a week since Arthur Moreton left, and a dreary, miserable week has it been to me. It is strange how little difference his absence seems to make to all the others; even Laura goes about much as usual, though her cheeks have lost their fresh, pink bloom, and there is a weary languor in all her movements which tells of a mind ill at ease. But I cannot regain my spirits, or even resume my usual occupations; all the brightness of youth seems to have departed from me. Well, it is early days yet; I may get to feel better as time goes on.

JUNE 10TH.—I am horribly disgusted with

myself. I, who boasted that I had never had a day's illness since I was six years old, am positively unwell, *ill*, I should say, if I had the slightest idea what is the matter with me. There is the puzzle. I have no headache, no sore throat, no cold of any description, but my hands burn in the morning, and are cold at night. I have no appetite, and I cannot force myself to take the slightest interest in anything. Also I have lost all my colour, and my eyes stand out with strange, unnatural brilliancy, from my thin cheeks.

Following Eugénie's advice, I take long walks. Yesterday I walked nearly nine miles before luncheon, but it is of no avail. Bridget says it is owing to all the worry I have had lately (good soul, she little knows *what* worry), and doses me with port wine and quinine. I do not believe they will do me any good, but I take them to satisfy her.

JUNE 14TH.—Captain Astley comes nearly every day. This morning he and Adelaide were practising for hours. They are both devoted to music, and it is a real pleasure

to hear them, their voices blend so harmoniously, and it seems a natural impossibility for either of them to sing a false note.

I was walking up and down the gravel walk outside the window, when I heard the first notes of that sweetest of old Scotch songs, "Robin Adair." Adelaide was singing, her whole soul in her voice, which sounded sweet and clear, like diamonds dropping on glass:—

"But now thou'rt cold to me,
Robin Adair;
Yet he I loved so well,
Still in my heart shall dwell;
Oh, I can ne'er forget,
Robin Adair."

The tears stood in my eyes—it takes very little to bring them now—and, glancing into the room, I saw Laura also listening, her dark head bent low, her whole frame shaking with suppressed, passionate sobs, as she heard the sweet, sad words, so applicable to us both.

"Don't sing that, Adelaide," I said, abruptly, stepping in at the open window;

“it is such a mournful thing, and it is too low for you.”

“I think she sings it beautifully,” said Captain Astley, half resentfully; “but we will try this now, Adelaide. Listen, Miss Hatherleigh, it is an old song, but is it not sweet?—

‘Sigh no more ladye, sigh no more,
Your sorrow is in vain,
For violets plucked, the sweetest showers
Will ne’er make grow again.’”

Worse and worse. I really feared that Laura would betray herself, she did not seem capable of rising and leaving the room, so I stood between her and the performers, meaning to divert their attention from her by talking about the music. Suddenly the room seemed to turn round rapidly; I felt myself falling, and caught hold of Captain Astley’s arm. After that I remember no more.

JUNE 20TH.—I have been very ill—nay, I am very ill still. I have strange unaccountable noises in my head, and all sorts of odd foolish fancies. I have asked Bridget to give me my old Diary, that I may scribble in it a

little before the doctor comes. I think writing may help to calm and settle my thoughts. A Mr. Moore attends me, a homœopathic doctor from Forde. Aunt Edith thinks a good deal of him, but he does not appear to understand my case. It is certainly a singular one. I am always worse after meals. Yesterday I took nothing all day but some coffee, which Eugénie kindly brought up to me, and directly after I felt extremely sick, and the terrible shooting pains in my head returned with redoubled agony.

I need scarcely say that Bridget attends me assiduously night and day. Laura and Adelaide are also very kind, and Uncle John is extremely anxious. He actually forsakes Commodus and Severus for half-an-hour each day to sit with me, and I think it is very good of him. To be sure, he is no great comfort, poor old gentleman; he fidgets about, rustles the newspaper, and nearly drives my poor head distracted with being obliged to shout out every trivial remark a dozen times over before he can hear it, for his deafness daily increases.

But I must appreciate the affectionate solicitude that makes him visit me. Yesterday he took it into his dear, foolish old head to read aloud an article in the *Times*, headed "Singular Stockbroking Case." Like all deaf people, he reads extremely loud, and though I listened as patiently as I could, I was at last obliged to ask him to leave off, and let me rest.

JUNE 24TH.—I am no better, if anything worse. Mr. Moore's treatment may be scientific, but it is not effectual in my case. I cannot now stand without assistance, my head swims if I even raise it from the pillow, and I take so little nourishment that I am worn to a skeleton. In this weakened state my thoughts run more than ever on Arthur Moreton. Last night I thought I saw him; if I was superstitious, and did not feel sure I was the victim of a delusive, feverish fancy, I should say I *had* seen him. He seemed to be standing at the bottom of the bed, and beckoned to me with his hand—a strange, horror-stricken expression in his eyes. He seemed as if about to speak, but at that

moment Eugénie entered the room. He quickly raised his hand with a warning gesture, and was gone. Eugénie came to my bedside, and asked kindly how I felt.

"No better," I replied. "It seems to me sometimes, Eugénie, as if I never should get any better."

"Ah, bah," she said, with her light ringing laugh; "you are low and nervous, that is all. It is late for you to be awake; have you taken your medicine?"

"Not yet, the bottle is on the mantel-piece. I do not think I will take it to-night, Eugénie; it does me no good."

"Oh, but we must be regular, or what will the good doctor say to us?"

She carried the bottle and the wine-glass into the next room, and also the little lamp which stood at my bedside, leaving me without a light. It seemed a strange proceeding, but I said nothing. Eugénie often does strange things. It so occurred that opposite the door leading into the next room (Bridget's bed-room) there stood a large looking-glass, inserted into the door of my wardrobe.

The light from the next room fell on it, and I could see Eugénie plainly in the reflection. I watched all her movements with a sort of languid curiosity. I saw her pour the medicine out into the wine-glass, and then, did my sight deceive me, or did she really take a tiny phial from her pocket and empty its colourless contents into the mixture.

It was an unaccountable proceeding—an unwarrantable liberty, to say the least of it. Eugénie had no right to mix any preparation of her own in my medicine, such conduct was wholly beside her province.

At that moment I was so far from comprehending the real reason for this act, that I cannot explain what instinct prevented me from calling out to Eugénie, and demanding her reason for tampering with the medicine. However that was, I kept silence, but resolved inwardly not to touch it, at any rate till I discovered what foreign liquid had been introduced. It happened that Bridget had left the wine-glass which had contained my last dose on the table by my bed, unwashed—a few drops of the mixture still

remaining at the bottom. For once her careless Irish habits served me in good stead. When Eugénie brought me the full wine-glass, I took it in my hand, at the same time asking her to get me a clean handkerchief from the drawer. During the moment that her head was turned away, I quickly substituted the empty wine-glass for the full one, placing that safely behind the curtain.

When she returned to my bed-side I put the empty glass in her hand, asking her to give it to Bridget, and see that it was properly washed. She had no suspicion of the trick I had played her, but took the glass in her hand, and left the room fully believing that I had taken the draught.

And I lay still and thought. Eugénie was not an idiot, nor, by any means, a weak, fanciful person. She must have had some good reason for the strange act I had witnessed. What was that reason? My recovery? If so, if she imagined that she knew of some medicine that might be of service to me, why not announce it openly? why make any mystery? If her motive was

not my recovery, what was it? Slowly the awful truth forced itself upon me, slowly (far more slowly than if I had been in rude health, with my mind in full vigour and clearness) I began to realize the position in which I stood.

All gradually became clear to me, all that had puzzled me during the last fortnight was now plain as daylight. Sir Edgar's strange and sudden intimacy with Eugénie, my illness, so unaccountable and peculiar in its symptoms, and now the sinister act I had just witnessed. These two persons had assuredly leagued themselves together against me; they had conceived a diabolical plot, the object of which was that Sir Edgar should succeed to the Hatherleigh estates, an occurrence which must infallibly take place in the event of my death.

What arguments he had used to induce Eugénie to take part in the nefarious transaction I could not tell. Doubtless, they were powerful ones—most likely of a pecuniary nature.

I had thought all this out with amazing

calmness and self-possession, but now a sudden panic seized me. I sat up in bed and rang the bell violently. In less than three minutes Bridget stood by my bed-side, inquiring with much anxiety if I felt worse. I seized her hand, and exclaimed,—

“Bridget, my life is in danger—in *great* danger. You must telegraph to Mr. Penrhyn at once; I know he will come: Mr. Wood is of no use.”

“I’ve done it, my darling,” she replied, in a triumphant tone.

“Done it?”

“To be sure. Did you think, my darling, I was going to see you waste away before my very eyes with no better help than that young man from Forde, who is little better than a born natural, in my opinion, with his water-mixtures and his sugar-pills? I wrote to Mr. Penrhyn last night, Miss Florence, and I’ve got the copy of the letter in my own room, written out on a slate.”

“Let me see it, Bridget.”

She hesitated, but, seeing I was resolved,

she fetched the slate, and placed it in my hands. The letter ran thus:—

“HONORED SIR,—This cums to tell you that my dear yung mistres, Miss Hatherleigh, is very ill, whom you may remember a little child when we lived at Ladyscourt. And I do hope, Sir, that you will luse no time in cumming to see her, because the yung man as attends her now is of no use at all, his medecine, in my humbel opinion, being no better than slop-wash, which is also obstinate, and listens to nothing, I can say, Sir; and my dear yung lady grows worse each day, poor lamb, and I fear is not long for this wurld, if you, Sir, do not cum without delay.

“From, sir, your humbel servant,

“BRIDGET O'MALLEY.”

“It is a very nice letter, Bridget,” I said, returning the slate to her, “but I doubt if it will bring him.”

“Sure it will, my darling,” she answered, eagerly. “He was so fond of you when you were a tiny, toddling thing, and he knew

your dear mother from a baby. Oh, but he'll be certain to come."

"What time could he arrive?" I said, meditatively. "You wrote last night; he would get it this morning early. If he started by the 9.45 from Ladyscourt, he might be here by eleven o'clock. Mr. Wood generally comes about that time."

"That's unlucky," said Bridget. "But trust me to smuggle him into the house, my dear. He shan't be turned away for all the Mr. Woods that ever were born. You look so pale, Miss Florence, darling; should I get you a little beef tea? There's some all ready and hot for you down below."

But I refused to touch that, or anything else. Till this mystery was cleared up, I resolved to eat and drink nothing in this house, for who could tell but that death in the shape of some secret poison may lurk in all the food that is brought to me? So Bridget left me, and sleep being far from my eyes, I reached for my Diary, and wrote out the above account as carefully as I could. It may be useful some day.

JUNE 25TH. Ten o'clock at night.—This has been a strange, sad day. I must write down what has happened while it is still fresh in my memory. I refused to take any breakfast this morning. Eugénie did not discover this, for I desired her to leave the cup of coffee she brought up from the dining-room by my bed-side, and as soon as she left the room I poured it all away.

About a quarter to eleven my anxiety as to whether Mr. Penrhyn would arrive became so insupportable, that I actually got out of bed, and so staggered alone to the window, where I sat and watched intently. For several minutes all was still, then the tramp of a horse's hoofs was heard up the avenue, and Sir Edgar appeared, mounted on his chestnut mare. Before he reached the front of the house, Eugénie came out, a small scarlet shawl wrapped round her head and shoulders. She was always afraid of catching cold. I watched her run down the gravel path to meet my cousin, who dismounted at once, and stood talking to her for several minutes. What could be the subject of their conver-

sation? Was some fresh plot hatching against me? Did the poison work too slowly for their purpose?

I watched them with as much earnestness as if I could hear what they were saying, when suddenly the door of my room opened, and Bridget appeared, and close behind her—Was my imagination again playing tricks with me, or was that, indeed, Mr. Penrhyn, with his snowy head, and kind genial countenance, so well remembered in the happy days at Ladyscourt? Well done, Bridget! She had managed to bring him into the house through the back garden, by a little side door very seldom used. There she had been watching ever since half-past ten o'clock, in order that she might prevent his fly driving round to the usual entrance. Had he attempted to enter the house by the front door, Eugénie and Sir Edgar would most certainly have seen and intercepted him.

Mr. Penrhyn gave a perceptible start as he caught sight of me; and no wonder. I must have presented an extraordinary spectacle. My thin, colourless face was sur-

rounded with dark curls, which fell all rough and untended over the little shawl I had wrapped round me. I had no slippers on my feet, and an imploring, terror-stricken look in my great black eyes. I think he imagined me delirious, for he advanced and took my hand, saying, in the kind, low, soothing voice I remembered so well,—

“My dear child, you ought not to be out of bed. Let me help you back—so; there, now you will keep warm and comfortable.”

He lifted me in his arms as if I had been a baby. Oh! the sense of confidence and protection that passed into my heart with that kind, fatherly touch! At a sign from me, Bridget left the room; and then, looking up in the dear old man’s face, I told him all my story. He listened at first with a kind, incredulous half-smile on his face, evidently thinking he was listening to the ravings of a feverish child; but before I had finished his look changed, and he said, in a brief, professional manner,—

“Show me the medicine.”

I gave him the glass which had stood all night safely concealed behind my curtain. He took it to the window, held it up to the light, even poured a little into a spoon and tasted it, and then looked up, and said, gravely,—

“There is something wrong here. My child, how long have you taken this medicine?”

“Three times every day.”

“For how long?”

“Only for three or four days; it has been changed lately.”

He asked me several other questions, and I was answering them as clearly as I could, when the door opened, and Mr. Wood entered, followed by Eugénie. She exclaimed in astonishment, as well she might, at the spectacle of a stranger conversing at my bed-side, evidently on the most friendly and confidential terms. Mr. Penrhyn stepped forward at once, and said, in his quiet, decided way,—

“I am the medical man who has attended Miss Hatherleigh’s family for a great many

years. She sent for me yesterday, and I felt it my duty to come without delay, not by any means to take Mr. Wood's place as her attendant, but to consult about her case with him."

"I think we might have been told of Miss Hatherleigh's wish to see a different medical man," said Eugénie, as insolently as she dared.

"Now that I have come, you will, I am sure, allow me to say a few words to Mr. Wood in private," replied Mr. Penrhyn.

Mr. Wood made some civil answer, and between them both Eugénie was fairly bowed out of the room. The two doctors then held a short whispered conversation together. Fortunately, it *was* whispered, for I was convinced that Eugénie was listening outside. I saw Mr. Wood's pale, inane-looking face change from its usual placid smile to an expression of almost terrified incredulity and horror; but Mr. Penrhyn's low, emphatic voice continued speaking, and at last he appeared to have gained his argument.

Mr. Wood walked to the window, and stood with his back to me, carefully examining the suspected mixture, while Mr. Penrhyn came to my bed-side, with tears in his eyes, and said, in a low voice, expressive of the most intense feeling,—

“You will be safe now, my dear; it is well you sent for me. We shall take this medicine away, and have it analyzed at once. This afternoon we shall *know* all that now we only suspect. Say nothing to any one till I see you again. I will give directions to your nurse about your food.”

I looked up into his face with flushed cheeks and a beating heart.

“It was so little she put in, Mr. Penrhyn—so very little; surely not enough to hurt me if it *had* been poison.”

“It was not enough to drown you in, and it was not enough to float a man-of-war; but it was enough for their purpose.”

He spoke in a deep tone of concentrated indignation.

“Come, Mr. Wood, we have much to do.”

Both doctors then left the house; and I

was alone, with only Bridget as a companion, till nearly five o'clock. Laura and Adelaide were spending the day out with some friends of Captain Astley's. Eugénie did not come near me.

At about five o'clock Mr. Penrhyn's voice sounded in the hall; then I heard the library-door open, and my uncle's voice desiring him to enter. About six o'clock I heard the sharp report of a pistol in the garden. What could it be? I felt absolutely sick with apprehension and anxiety; but in about ten minutes Mr. Penrhyn came into my room, his kindly, ruddy face blanched to a sickly white.

"An awful thing has happened, my dear," he said, taking my hand. "It is better that you should know all at once."

"Yes, yes," I said, breathlessly. "What is it? Tell me all, Mr. Penrhyn. Hide nothing."

"Eugénie has confessed all; and your cousin, Sir Edgar Hatherleigh, has shot himself in the garden. You must have heard the report but a few minutes ago."

“Is he dead?”

“Quite dead.”

He then told me all particulars. But I can write no more to-night. My head is dizzy, and the letters swim before my eyes.

One thought only is before my eyes, and it is so awful a one that it excludes all others. Sir Edgar is *dead*; killed by his own hand; gone to judgment with all his sins on his head; he who was my nearest relation in the world; he who was to have been my husband. I will harbour no resentful thought against his memory, poor deluded, unfortunate, misguided young man! I will not remember that he had intended my death; I will only say, “God forgive him.”

CHAPTER XIII.

DIARY CONTINUED.

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play,
For some must watch while some must sleep,
So runs the world away.

Hamlet.

JULY 1ST.—It is more than a week since I last wrote in my Diary—a week of much suffering to me and anxiety to my friends. The excitement caused by the events of that terrible 24th of June told on my weakened frame to such a degree, that I firmly believe nothing but Mr. Penrhyn's kind and unremitting care, and Bridget's indefatigable nursing, could have saved my life. However, the worst is now over, and, though weak as an infant, I have enough strength to write down the events of the past few days.

Mr. Penrhyn informed me, that having ascertained beyond a doubt that the medicine Eugénie had tampered with contained poison, he returned to this house, and acquainted my uncle with all the circumstances of the case. They both (accompanied, of course, by Mr. Wood) then went to Eugénie's room, and, by some adroit questioning, Mr. Penrhyn contrived to make her believe that not only had the design on my life been discovered, but that he was in possession of *all* the particulars of the plot. She then, with the quick, revengeful temper of a Frenchwoman, and the suspicious turn of mind that always attends guilt, instantly jumped to the conclusion that Sir Edgar had endeavoured to throw all the blame on her in order to screen himself, and, to use her own language, she determined to "be even with him." The consequence was, that she made a full confession, stating that Sir Edgar was certainly the more guilty of the two, as he had persuaded her to attempt the crime in order that he might be freed from his various

debts and embarrassments (which she represented as both numerous and pressing) by the possession of Ladyscourt.

Further questioning elicited the fact that if the plot had succeeded, Eugénie's reward was to have been the sum of five thousand pounds down, and an annuity of four hundred a year for her life. She confessed to having four times administered small doses of poison (supplied by Sir Edgar) to me; once in a cup of coffee, and three times in my medicine.

More than this she had been unable to accomplish, owing, she said, to the constant care and supervision exercised by Bridget. She feared to awaken suspicion if the work was ended too quickly, or she might easily have mixed larger doses of the vegetable poison employed with my food; but Mr. Penrhyn stated it as his firm conviction that nothing could have saved my life if I had, for a fifth time, partaken of the poisoned draught.

Some signals had been arranged by which the guilty parties could communicate with

each other if their secret was discovered; and Eugénie found some means of acquainting my cousin with the fact that she had confessed *all*. It must have been cleverly managed, for she was not left alone for an instant; but she managed to approach the window unperceived, and make a sign to Sir Edgar, who was walking in the garden beneath. A few minutes afterwards, the shot was heard which made my cousin a suicide as well as a murderer. Mr. Penrhyn and my uncle instantly rushed to the garden, and found Sir Edgar lying near the game-keeper's lodge, perfectly dead.

The keeper, Williams, a very sober, trustworthy man, stated that a few minutes before Sir Edgar had walked up to him as he was shooting rabbits in the copse, and asked for the gun, saying that he would return it in a few minutes. The man unsuspectingly complied, thinking that the young gentleman wished to "try his luck with the rabbits," but was horror-stricken to observe him walk a few paces away, and then coolly raise the gun to his head, and

shoot himself through the brain. For that night, Eugénie was confined to her own room, with the door strictly guarded; but by some means, never satisfactorily explained, but probably owing to the connivance of one of the servants, she managed to effect her escape. Next morning, the creepers outside her window were found much torn, and even uprooted, as though some person had used them as a means of descent; but more than this we never knew.

At my most earnest request, my uncle did not place the matter in the hands of the police—not even Laura and Adelaide ever understood the real facts of the case; and for many years they firmly believed that Eugénie's sudden disappearance from the house was owing to some unsuspected love affair—a strange, unnatural supposition, considering the French governess's age, appearance, and unromantic, prosaic character; but it was the only solution of the mystery at which they could ever arrive.

Of course an inquest was held over my poor cousin's remains, and a verdict of "Temporary insanity" was returned without much discussion. Several officers of his regiment (Captain Astley amongst them) declared that he had been in a highly excitable state for several days past, owing, they believed, to a late unfortunate love affair. To this day I have been told that many of them think the rupture of my miserable engagement was the cause of his untimely death.

Well, I deserve all they can say of me, but it is some consolation to my own mind to know that this was not the case. No love for *me*, but disappointed *hate*, ambition, and pride, were the causes that led to his self-murder. It has been a sad, awful chapter in my life, but it is closed now; the only enemies I ever had are gone, and will never trouble me again.

I will write no more in this Diary, the very sight of the little purple-book recalls so many painful associations, that I mean to put it away, locked up safely, in my

private drawer, and not look at it again, —at any rate not for many years.

There are no more entries in the Diary; the rest of my life at this time I must detail from recollection. I remember well how drearily the long beautiful July days passed away while I was slowly and painfully struggling back to health. Adelaide was, of course, always with Captain Astley, and I saw very little of Laura.

Our new curate, Mr. Alexander, was a very High Churchman. If it had not been for the check good old Mr. Moreton occasionally exercised, no one can tell to what lengths we might not have gone. Laura entered into all the new views with the energy and absorption which formed part of her character. She erected a small *Prie-Dieu* contrivance in her room, wore a large carved crucifix depending from her waist (a proceeding which always appeared to me most painfully irreverent), and observed all the Saints' Days with the most religious exactitude. The poor soul seemed to find some consolation in all this ritual

for the weary pain that preyed upon her mind and spirits; but I cannot say that it improved her temper, or had any effect in making her more gentle and charitable. On the contrary, she became more reserved, more dogmatical than ever,—snubbing all my frequent efforts at a more genial intercourse, and affecting to look upon Adelaide's innocent happiness with a kind of contemptuous cynicism.

My uncle shut himself up more than ever with his books and his papers, and Aunt Edith grew weaker day by day, bearing her prolonged sufferings with a gentle patience which was a lesson to us all.

At last the day came when I was sufficiently recovered to take a drive—a glorious July afternoon, with just enough breeze to prevent the heat from being oppressive. Need I say that I directed the coachman to drive first to the Rectory? A sort of dismal foreboding seized my heart as we drove up the garden-walk, and I saw that, in spite of the beauty of the day, Dorothy

was not out. However, when I entered the drawing-room, she was there, lying on her sofa as usual, surrounded by her books and work. But, ah! how altered. All the sunny brightness which had formed the principal characteristic of her face seemed to have fled. She was sweet and gentle as ever; but the sweetness was not so spontaneous as it used to be, and the gentleness told more of resignation than of happiness.

After a few minutes' conversation, I could not resist saying,—

“You do not look as well as usual, dear Dorothy; something is weighing on your mind. You have not had bad news from Africa?”

“No, no, dear,” she answered, brightly and quickly; “Arthur writes most cheerfully and hopefully, and the Bishop is a wise, tender friend to him. It is only selfishness, I *cannot* get used to being without him. He formed all the joy and brightness of my life; the duties remain unaltered, but the loving companionship that made them

so easy is withdrawn. I shall get more reconciled in time. You were telling me of yourself, my poor Florence. What a terrible time you must have had!"

I saw that she wished to turn the conversation from herself, so I told her the sad history of the last few weeks, and she listened with most unfeigned sympathy and interest. But I could not stay long, refreshing as it was to be with her again. My cheeks had lost the little colour they had gained during my drive, and I felt more weary and exhausted than I should have thought possible after so slight an exertion.

As I drove up to the hall-door, I caught sight of Adelaide standing in the hall, her pretty face looking flushed and excited. As I entered the house, she took my hand, and said, in a low tone of shy, subdued happiness,—

"Our wedding-day is fixed, Florence. We are to be married on the 1st of August. John has been here this morning and settled it all with papa. Only fancy, in less than

a fortnight I shall be his wife—his happy wife.”

I kissed her, and said something kind and congratulatory; but I was too weary to talk much, and went to my own room, to rest for a little before dressing for dinner. However, I was not destined to enjoy much repose, for in about half-an-hour Laura's sharp, decided knock sounded at the door, and she entered with her hat on, a large basket on one arm.

“I am sorry to disturb you, Florence,” she said. “Adelaide told me you wanted to rest, but I wished to speak to you about this marriage. Does it not appear a very indecorous thing that you should be bridesmaid, or, indeed, that the wedding should take place at all, while you are in such deep mourning?”

“I had not thought of being a bridesmaid,” I replied. “I am surprised that Adelaide should have wished it. But I do not see why the marriage need be postponed, my—Sir Edgar was a very distant connexion of yours.”

"But the event happening so near us, actually in these grounds, I must say it seems to me indecorous that wedding festivities should take place here not five weeks after his funeral."

"Have you spoken to Aunt Edith?" I asked; "she is sure to attend to what you say."

"No, I have so little time. I meant to have read to her this morning, and perhaps discussed the question afterwards; but it is the Festival of St. Blasius: I must not miss the evening, and of course the morning service took up all my time."

"Surely, Laura, Mr. Alexander would think you were doing your duty in attending on your mother. He cannot expect you to spend your entire days in church."

Laura rose, and composed her heavy black draperies with an air of dignity.

"We need not enter upon that question, Florence. We do not think alike on the subject, and argument never convinces any one. If I am not home to dinner, you can tell papa that I have gone on to the night-

school. Mrs. Parker will give me something to eat."

And she swept off, leaving me to much-needed repose. That same evening, after dinner, I was summoned to Aunt Edith's room, and found her sitting up in an arm-chair, looking exceedingly pale and weak.

"You have, no doubt, heard that the day for Adelaide's marriage is fixed?" she began, in a faint, scarcely audible voice. "I feel so ill this evening, that I almost doubt if I shall live so long."

"Don't talk in that melancholy way, aunt," I said, cheerfully. "You are no worse than you were a week ago, and you told me you had a better night than usual."

"I think, Florence, that if I could get away from Dalehurst for a little while I should be better. I have not moved from this place at all for so many years, and I believe half my weakness is caused by depression of spirits. What should you think of our all going to Brighton for a month after Adelaide's marriage?"

“An excellent idea, aunt,” I exclaimed, with animation, “It will do you all the good in the world.”

“You would like it, my dear?”

“Yes, oh yes, I should be too thankful to go away for a short time.”

“To be sure. How selfish we have been not to think of something of the kind before. When you go downstairs, dear, ask your uncle to come to me for a minute.”

This I did, and, in an incredibly short time, this important matter was settled. We were all to go to Brighton the day after Adelaide's wedding.

The intermediate days passed away very quickly. The whole house was in the bustle and turmoil that seems inevitable on the eve of a wedding; but my still delicate health was an excuse for my keeping out of the turmoil, and I spent the days chiefly in attendance on my aunt, or in the peaceful solitude of my own room. I saw Dorothy twice, and was more struck each time with the alteration in her appearance. Added to her natural grief and loneliness at the loss

of her brother, she had to struggle against much increased weakness of body. The great heat of those long July days, combined with a parching east wind that blew incessantly, tried her exceedingly. Her daily tasks were accomplished; little Rose and Eleanor taught as carefully and lovingly as ever; her father helped in his parish duties with the same tender solicitude as of old; but it was all got through with a strain and effort that could not last long.

My one grief in leaving Dalehurst, the place of so many desolate hours and sad associations, was the parting from her. At times the past seemed like a strange, sad dream, and I should have been scarcely surprised to have seen Eugénie's trim little figure sitting at work in her accustomed place, or Sir Edgar's tall, thin form riding up the avenue on his chestnut horse. These nervous fancies were, no doubt, caused in part by my extreme weakness. The poison which had been impregnated into my blood was not to be worked off easily. Still, I often felt confused sensations in my head,

my hands often burned with feverish heat, and, strangest of all, I had entirely lost my colour. That bright carmine tinting had been one of my chief beauties, but it was gone for ever.

I sat for hours in the open air, I took walks, I even tried a gentle canter on Ladybird, but all to no purpose. My cheeks retained their death-like hue, which gradually softened to an ivory whiteness—a strange and startling contrast to my coal-black eyes and waves of dark hair.

At last, the day before the wedding arrived. Adelaide's huge boxes were all packed and standing in the hall, the monogram "A. E. A." shining out upon them in clear brass letters; all the wedding presents had been received and inspected, Aunt Edith was lying down in her room completely exhausted, and I had retired to mine to have a quiet cup of tea. About five o'clock there was a knock at my door, and, to my surprise, Adelaide entered, looking very white and tired.

"I came to have a chat with you, Flory,"

she said, throwing herself into the only easy-chair that my room could boast. "It is the last we shall have for a long time."

"Not so very long," I answered, smiling; "we shall soon see you back again. Captain Astley means to come here in the autumn, does he not?"

"I don't know; I have not asked him to mention any time."

Adelaide's fingers were playing nervously with her emerald engaged-ring. At last she looked up, and said quickly,—

"I wish *you* were going to be married, Florence. You have not been very happy with us—not so happy as you ought to have been. Now that I am going away, you must just let me say that I am sorry for it; if the time was coming over again, I would act differently to you."

"Dear Adelaide, say no more; you have all been so much kinder lately."

"You are a dear, forgiving, little soul, Florence. We have both been horribly jealous of you, and that's the fact. I be-

lieve you are much more really religious than Laura, with all her relics, and saints'-days, and crucifixes."

"Don't say that, Adelaide," I replied. "These outward signs are a great help to some minds (Mr. Moreton used to say so), and we should not grudge to others what we do not find necessary for ourselves. Poor Laura is very unhappy. I think she would be very ill if she had not all these fresh occupations and interests to keep her mind employed."

"She does not seem happy. I wonder what can be the matter. Laura always was a mystery. Florence, you—you do not suppose that she can have fallen in love with my John?"

I nearly laughed at a supposition so very wide of the mark.

"No, no, Adelaide; don't be alarmed; she cares no more for Captain Astley than—than you do for Mr. Alexander."

"That can't be much then," returned Adelaide, with her own merry laugh, "for I detest that man, with his cropped head

and long straight coat—just the sort of figure children scribble on their slates. How any man can bear to make himself such a guy!”

“Mr. Moreton thinks he is a good man,” was my reply; “and I don’t think we ought to laugh at him, ought we? You look so pale, Addie. I wish you would lie down—remember to-morrow.”

“Oh, never mind about me, I shall do very well. I never was the least nervous, and I am not going to begin to-morrow.”

Nevertheless, she took my advice, and went early to bed; the consequence of which was, that she rose the next morning thoroughly rested and refreshed. No rose could look fresher and sweeter than our young bride. I felt as if I had never fully realized her exceeding beauty till she stood before us in her wedding robes—the filmy lace veil shading her golden hair, and throwing a most becoming softness over her bright face. During the ceremony, I stood behind a pillar, and watched Laura (who was the only bridesmaid) quietly and steadily go

through her appointed part with cheeks and lips of ashy whiteness.

As we moved to leave the church, I saw her turn and glance earnestly round the building, her eye resting especially on the pulpit and reading-desk where Mr. Moreton had so often stood, as though taking a long farewell. The action seemed unaccountable to me at that time; I soon understood its meaning.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT BRIGHTON.

The innumerable laughter of the sea.

From ESCHYLUS.

THE day after Adelaide's wedding, we were all comfortably settled in quiet lodgings in the King's Road, at Brighton. Brighton!—town rightly named, with its glittering sea, its sunny parade, its breezy downs, and its fresh invigorating air—"atmospheric champagne," as it has been called.

I soon grew very fond of Brighton, though I am not much attached to that great, heaving, restless thing called the sea. After all, what is it but a vast churchyard? And yet how gaily it tosses, and rolls, and gambols over the graves of its victims—over the still white faces that are looking up by scores from below, "each in his coral cave."

I often stood on the beach at Brighton and watched the tiny waves come rolling in, looking so innocent and harmless with their transparent green bodies and white foamy heads. But when they reach the shore, what a sudden treacherous rush they make up the shingly beach, engulfing the feet of the little children who may happen to be standing too near. If it could only entangle them in that perilous undertow, how swiftly and triumphantly it would drag them back—back, till they met a cold, cruel death in the green depths beyond.

It may be a gloomy view to take, but the sea always appeared to me like some heartless, beautiful coquette, who cares little for the heart she has broken, or the homes she has made desolate, if she may only pursue her own gay triumphant path unheeded and unchecked, because the master-hand has never yet risen which is able to subdue her. But if I do not love the sea *individually* (if the term may be so used), I love all that the sea brings with it—the glittering sands, with their countless treasures of seaweed and shell; the

low murmur and ripple, which would lead one to believe the cruel, treacherous thing some tender nursing mother soothing a child to sleep; and the fresh health-giving breezes, bearing a salt fragrance sweeter to my mind than any Piesse and Lubin can supply.

Brighton is considered a very hot place in July, but we did not find it so. There was always a cool breeze which prevented the heat from becoming that oppressive, overwhelming thing it is in London, and even in the country.

Every morning Laura and I took our books and went down to the shore, to sit there in the shade of some boat, or when these were all occupied, under huge green umbrellas, often allowing ourselves to be lulled to sleep by the ceaseless "hush!" "hush!" of the crisp tiny waves, and feeling as if, like Tennyson's 'Lotos-Eaters,' we had drifted into a "land where it was always afternoon."

My uncle thoroughly enjoyed himself; he actually developed nautical tastes (the very last I should have expected from him). The Roman Emperors were entirely laid aside for

the time, and he marched up and down the Parade in the full serenity of health and happiness, occasionally holding long conversations with the sailors, who disappointed him by their total inability to explain scientifically the management and mechanism of their boats.

My gentle aunt was the only one of us who did not materially benefit by the sea-air, and even she was happy in her quiet way, every day drawn along the cliff in a wheel-chair by the same red-faced, jovial-looking chairman, sometimes even getting as far as the Aquarium, where she would desire the chair to stand still, and give her time to enjoy the silver sheet of water spread out before her, bounded by the long irregular line of houses on one side, and the white chalk cliffs of Albion on the other.

We knew positively *no one* at Brighton. At least we were for about ten days under that happy delusion, when one afternoon, as Laura and I were walking down the Green to take up our accustomed shady position in the rear of a small yacht, we

were passed by a lady and a tall young man, evidently her son. He looked earnestly at me, and I heard him remark to his mother,—

“That is the little girl I was telling you of, with a face like carved ivory. Is she not—?”

I heard no more, for they had passed by; but in another moment the old red-faced chairman came running up to us, saying that my aunt wished us to come to her at once.

We retraced our steps quickly, and found Aunt Edith sitting at her chair, the lady and gentleman I had noticed standing by her, evidently conversing on friendly terms.

“These are dear old friends of mine,” said Aunt Edith, looking up with smiling eyes. “My niece and my daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Dayrell.”

Here my uncle came up from the Parade, where he had been sunning himself, and, his eyes being dazzled with the glare, shook hands affectionately with Laura, expressing his satisfaction at seeing her again

after an absence of so many years. This little mistake was soon rectified, and we all became good friends.

Mrs. Dayrell was a quiet, lady-like person, middle-aged, handsomely dressed, nothing very particular about her. But the son was a most noticeable person. Tall, and very upright, yet with nothing military in his appearance, fair, crisp curls clustering round a magnificently-formed head, a soft gold moustache, and fair, regular, yet manly features, he looked like a *son* of the gods,—“divinely tall, and most divinely fair!”

This may seem an enthusiastic description to give of a young man's outward appearance; but remember, good reader, that I claim to write with the privileges of an old woman. In my girlish days I should probably have observed simply that Mr. Dayrell was “good-looking,” but, seen through the mist of years, his form stands out as pre-eminently the handsomest man I ever saw in my life.

There my favourable description must

end. Never did I see a human being made so exclusively for ornament and not for use. Few young men are gifted with much flow of conversation, but he had none at all.

Up and down the Green we paced; Mrs. Dayrell, Aunt Edith, and my uncle engaged in earnest conversation behind, we three young ones in front, and a more wearisome half-hour I never spent.

When he had remarked three times that "The sea was quite dazzling; 'pon my honour, it must hurt the eyes. Wonder all the inhabitants of Brighton are not blind!" his stock of conversation seemed exhausted, and we walked along in gloomy silence, till, after my usual fashion, I began to moralize. How infinitely preferable was Arthur Moreton as a companion, with his plain, irregular features, and stern, uncompromising manner, to this curled and scented darling. (Observe, reader, the original cynicism of seventeen.) To be sure he was good to look at, so is a peach, or a rose-bud. Under a glass-shade he

would have been unexceptional, but as a companion, even for half-an-hour, he was unspeakably wearisome.

At last Mrs. Dayrell declared she was tired, and must go home at once, if "dear Reginald" would escort her. "Dear Reginald" looked unutterably savage things, but was compelled to submit; so he tucked his mother under his arm and strode off, casting a farewell, admiring glance at me, which turned my relief into a kind of amused indignation.

The next evening Mrs. Dayrell sent a note asking us all (after the primitive fashion of Brightoners) to tea. My uncle and aunt sent excuses for themselves on the plea of health, but Laura and I were pressed into the service, and seven o'clock found us located in the Dayrells' comfortably furnished house in Brunswick Terrace.

Imagine us, therefore, for the space of one hour and a half, in the following positions. Mrs. Dayrell and Laura carrying on a conversation on the sofa, which was as well sustained as was possible under

the circumstances, one of the parties making praiseworthy efforts to conceal her yawns, the other struggling with heroic fortitude against an almost irresistible tendency to go to sleep.

I established myself in an easy-chair near the open window, and Apollo (as I had nicknamed our handsome friend) stood near me, making superhuman efforts to render himself amusing and original. I did not second his endeavours. I wonder he did not consider me the most stupid, uninteresting girl he had ever met (though the event proved he *did not*), for I leaned back in my chair, watching the deep blue sea as it heaved and rose in the soft twilight, and thought of Arthur Moreton.

“We have noticed you so often on the beach,” began Apollo, making sundry gymnastic inclinations in order to catch my eye. “You were always so well hidden behind boats or under parasols, that we scarcely knew your faces, but mamma said at once that she was sure you were not sisters.”

How I hate to hear a grown-up man say "mamma"! I replied, sleepily,—

"Laura and I are rather alike in colouring. I am more like her than her own sister, Adelaide, who is very fair."

"No one could take you for sisters," he went on persistently, thankful, no doubt, to have found a topic on which he could be naturally complimentary. "Her complexion is as rosy as a milkmaid's, while your skin is as pure and fair as—as a sea-shell."

"I had plenty of colour before I was ill," I replied, in no way affected by the original compliment. "I wish I had not lost it all. I like rosy girls."

"I hate them."

We relapsed into silence. Mrs. Dayrell's voice sounded across the room, rousing me from my reverie by the startling question,—

"Was that poor Sir Edgar Hatherleigh, in the —th, any relation of yours, Miss Hatherleigh? We used to know him so well when the regiment was quartered at York."

"He was my first cousin."

"Oh, indeed! Ah, I see you are in mourning. Poor young fellow, how sad his end was! Of course, you know all the particulars?"

"Cut his own throat, or something, didn't he?" broke in Apollo, vexed at the interruption.

"He shot himself," was my reply, in a low voice, turning again to look out at the sea.

"People said it was owing to some unfortunate love affair," said Mrs. Dayrell. "He had been engaged (so I was told) to some young lady to whom he was deeply attached, but who threw him over at the last moment."

"Don't wonder. He was a hideous fellow. Reddest hair I ever saw," remarked Apollo.

"It was base, heartless conduct," answered his mother, severely. "A girl who would so treat a man who loved her, would do *anything*. I trust she may live to repent her wickedness."

I could stand it no longer. I glanced

first at Laura, and as she sat silent and motionless as a statue, I spoke quickly,—

“I am the girl you are speaking of, Mrs. Dayrell. I do not wish to cast any shade on my cousin’s memory; but I had good reasons for acting as I did.”

Dead silence fell on the room. We all looked supremely uncomfortable. Apollo gazed fixedly out of window, twisting his moustache, and, no doubt, inwardly reviling his mother. Laura and I sat so still that every breath could be distinctly heard in the room. Mrs. Dayrell was the first to recover herself.

“You must forgive my imprudent remarks, Miss Hatherleigh,” she said, in an apologetic tone. “One is apt to speak without knowing all the facts of the case. I am sure that *you* are not the sort of girl to act heartlessly.”

How could she tell? she had only known me twenty-four hours. I made some awkward rejoinder, to the effect “that she need not concern herself, I should forget all she had said under a wrong impression,” and tea

entering at that moment, produced a happy *divertissement*.

“Do not trouble the young ladies to leave their chairs, dear Reginald,” said Mrs. Dayrell. “Hand the tea-cups, and don’t upset them ; now, take care.”

In spite of this maternal caution, Apollo’s well-shaped hands seemed to be suddenly affected with a nervous trembling, and, as he handed me the bread-and-butter, his elbow knocked against my tea-cup, and sent the steaming contents into my black-crape lap.

“Jove! what an awkward fellow I am,” was his first exclamation, and it was so undeniably true that I did not attempt to contradict it, but passively endured Mrs. Dayrell’s exclamations, excuses, and apologies, and finally went up-stairs to be scrubbed dry by the lady’s-maid.

After tea, it grew rapidly dark, and, as Laura and Mrs. Dayrell were engaged in a game of chess, Mr. Dayrell invited me to come out on the balcony, and “have a look at the stars.” I complied; but, having strained

my neck in all directions, was obliged to announce the fact that there were none to be seen.

"Oh, no, more there are; don't go in, Miss Hatherleigh, it is getting so dark, they'll be out soon, sure to."

He spoke as if the stars were young ladies on the point of being introduced into the world.

"It is very cloudy to-night," I replied, leaning on the balcony, and gazing down on the passers-by. "I wonder people like to be out so late; see, there are some young ladies actually starting for a walk."

"Of course, this is the best time for going out; no one in Brighton thinks of taking a walk in summer before eight o'clock."

"Don't they? How very odd."

"Oh, you've no idea how delicious it would be now by the sea, the splashing of the waves, and the moon on the waters, just like—well, like a scene at Drury Lane, 'The Abode of the Water-Sprites,' or something of that sort. Won't you try

it some night? Mamma would go with us."

He was getting quite eager, and I answered, coldly,—

"I don't think Aunt Edith would like us to be out so late with *strangers*."

I was spared his mortified rejoinder, for it was scarcely begun when, leaning from the balcony, I caught sight of a well-known figure in red shawl and black bonnet, and instantly retreated into the drawing-room, and said,—

"Get your shawl, Laura; Bridget is come for us. It is such a lovely night, we can walk home."

Mrs. Dayrell took an affectionate leave of us, with many apologies for the dullness of the evening, though I am sure she considered them uncalled for as far as I was concerned. Who could be dull who had the unspeakable privilege of talking and being talked to by "dear Reginald"?

When we were fairly out into the street I drew a long breath, and remarked,—

“Well, that was the very stupidest evening I ever spent in my life.”

“You seemed very well amused,” said Laura, coldly, “and no wonder. Mr. Dayrell is evidently much smitten with your charms. I should not be surprised if you receive a declaration before we leave Brighton.”

“*He'd better,*” I replied, savagely, with utter disregard of grammatical proprieties. And we said not another word till we reached our own door.

Two days after this my uncle informed me that, in a moment of weakness, he had actually allowed Mrs. Dayrell to wheedle him into telling her the whole history of my cousin's attempt on my life, and the cause of his untimely death. I must say the poor old gentleman seemed ashamed of himself; and it certainly was an inexplicably foolish thing to trust a woman like Mrs. Dayrell (or *any* woman, except, perhaps, Dorothy Moreton) with a secret of such consequence.

I was not surprised next morning (when,

as usual, we encountered the good lady and her son on the Green) that she desired him to walk on with Laura, and then made a most unnecessarily elaborate apology to me for her hasty judgment, expressed in total ignorance of the real facts of the case.

"Pray say no more, Mrs. Dayrell," I interrupted; "I am sure no apology is needed now, and the subject is a very distasteful one to me. Please let us drop it, once for all."

"Certainly, my dear Miss Hatherleigh, certainly; it is, of course, a most distressing time for you to look back upon. But there is just one thing I want to ask you, for it has puzzled me very much—How did your uncle manage to induce two respectable medical men to hush up such a crime as an attempt at poisoning? It is almost as bad as compounding a felony; indeed, I am not sure it is not the same thing."

"The circumstances were very peculiar," I answered, reluctantly. "Mr. Penrhyn was an old friend of ours; he had been intimate with the family so many years that I believe

he feels our interests almost identical with his own. What object could we gain by making the matter public? My poor cousin was dead, Eugénie had disappeared, and I believe the distress and shame of having our name dragged before the public, and held up to scorn in the newspapers, would have killed me outright in the state I was then."

"But there was another doctor concerned?"

"Yes, Mr. Wood; but he was a very young man, not very clever, and very easily persuaded. Besides, he must have felt that if it had not been for Mr. Penrhyn I might have been poisoned twenty times over before he would have discovered that anything was wrong. He could scarcely be persuaded that it was necessary to analyze the medicine. It is certainly *his* interest to keep the matter quiet, if he wishes ever to be employed again. Now, dear Mrs. Dayrell, let us say no more about it."

In spite of my request, she was about to ask some other question, when, fortunately for me, Mr. Dayrell grew tired of

stalking on in front with Laura, and turned round to address some observation to me. The conversation then became general, and Mrs. Dayrell was compelled to keep silence on the painful topic, which ought never to have been introduced.

That afternoon Laura and I agreed that we were tired to death of "*toujours* Dayrell," and planned an expedition to the Black Rocks, in order to secure a quiet afternoon to ourselves.

Laura was strangely silent during our walk (even for her), and when we reached the rocks I thought she would prefer to be left to her own thoughts instead of being worried to make conversation. So I spread a cloak on one of the broad flat stones, using another as a back, and was soon absorbed in the 'Heir of Redclyffe.' After a few minutes, however, she spoke.

"Did you not hear from Dorothy Moreton yesterday, Florence?"

"No, from little Rose. Dorothy was not well enough to write herself," I replied.

"I am sorry to hear that. She has had

no fresh anxieties, I trust; no bad news from—from Africa.”

“No; on the contrary, the accounts are most satisfactory.”

Silence again for a few minutes. Then Laura spoke in a studiously careless tone, looking away the while, and dropping pebbles into a clear little pool close to her side.

“I have something to say to you, Florence, which, perhaps, you will not be very sorry to hear. I am not going home with you on Thursday week; I am never going back to Dalehurst at all.”

My book fell from my hand, and I exclaimed, in blank astonishment,—

“What *can* you mean, Laura? Are you going to be married?”

She gave a bitter little laugh.

“Yes; but not in the way you suppose. I am going to be the bride of Heaven. I am going into a convent.”

I verily thought she had lost her senses. Yet she looked quiet and natural enough, sitting there on the stone by my side,

her head resting on her hand, her great dark eyes fixed on a little ship, with snowy sails, which had just rounded the point, and was passing along close to the shore.

"You are a Protestant," I managed to say at last.

"There are Protestant convents, and it is to one of them I am going. I have been in correspondence with the Superior for some time, and she has at last agreed to receive me, provided I can obtain my parents' consent."

"They never *will* give their consent."

She smiled, with the calm certainty of power.

"I am not afraid of that. I have had my own way from my childhood upwards, and I am not likely to give in now."

I felt that she was right; she would certainly gain her point, if she was resolute enough and patient enough. So I only said,—

"I hope you have well considered this step, Laura. You are so very young,—not yet twenty-three. Think what bright possibilities life may have in store for you."

She smiled again,—a smile not good to see.

“Look at that ship,” she answered, stretching out her small white hand towards the sea; “does it not look calm and peaceful, gliding along so safely and steadily, that sunny sky above, and that calm sea below? But do you not see that bank of clouds in the west? In a few hours they will spread and break, and there will be howling winds and tossing, angry waves. Woe to the little ship then if she is not safe in harbour! My voyage of life began (like hers) in brightness and safety, but a storm broke early in the day, and, dismasted and shipwrecked, what can I do better than seek safety in some quiet harbour?”

My eyes were full of tears. Who would have expected to hear all this from Laura, —that cold, reserved, uncommunicative girl?

After a minute, I replied, almost awe-struck at her strange looks and words,—

“You speak as people do who are going to die; but—”

“I *am* dying,” she interrupted. “In a few days I shall be dead—dead to you all,—to the world, to all that makes life. I should not have spoken to you in this way, if we were likely ever to meet again after next week.”

“This is very strange,” I murmured. “It is, I suppose, the best thing for you; but the silence, the gloom, the dreary monotony of a convent! Oh! I *could* not bear it.”

She made no reply to this; but, after a minute, she said,—

“I want to ask you a question, Florence; don’t answer me if you would rather not. Have you any idea that Arthur—Mr. Moreton, ever cared for you?”

Some girls might have parried the question, knowing of what vital interest it was to her, but I have always been entirely wanting in that most convenient attribute called “tact.” So I only looked away, with cheeks (for the moment) ruddier than the ruddiest cherry, and replied, in a low tone,—

"Yes, he did."

"You refused him, then?"

"No," I replied, sadly; "I never had the opportunity. Before he proposed to me I had accepted Sir Edgar; of course, after that there was no hope. I only heard of his attachment from Dorothy."

"You say '*no hope*.' Did you care for him, then?"

"I loved him dearly."

She said no more, but in a few minutes we both rose, and walked back in silence. Before we reached home the wind had risen, and that peaceful sea was lashed into angry, foaming waves.

Next morning, heading the list of casualties in the *Brighton Daily News*, was the loss of the brig Luna. It was the little vessel we had seen; and Laura pointed it out to me with a sad, meaning smile. Was the analogy to be complete?

CHAPTER XV.

MY SECOND OFFER.

Beware of desperate steps. The darkest day,
Live till to-morrow, will have passed away.

COWPER.

LAURA gained her point, as I knew she would. By dint of sheer obstinacy, or superior strength of will, whichever it may be called, she triumphed over my uncle's alternate anger and entreaties, and my aunt's tearful prayers.

We had two miserable days of perpetual and stormy argument, and on the third Uncle John declared, with much heat, that he would dispute the point no longer; his daughter was of age, and if she deliberately resolved, after all that had been said, to bury herself alive in a convent, and deprive her old parents of their only remaining

child, she was at liberty to do it. Let her go, he would not hinder her.

Knowing that this permission (if such it can be called) had only been extorted in a moment of anger, and that any day it was likely to be recalled, Laura wisely did all in her power to expedite matters, and by her urgent letters prevailed on the Superior (of St. Agnes' Convent, only five miles from Brighton) to receive her two days before our departure,—that is, barely four days after my uncle had given his consent.

She was a most extraordinary girl. Only twenty-three, on the point of separating herself, by her own choice, from her home, her parents, and every friend she had in the world! She never gave way, never shed a tear, that I could see, but went about her preparations with as much composure as if she was only going to leave home for a week. Only once did she show any signs of emotion. It was the day before her departure, when a letter arrived from Adelaide, written from Paris, in a strain of affectionate indignation and sur-

prise on hearing the news, ending, however, with the remark,—

“I know it is of no use to write all this, because Laura always did take her own way, and always will. Only tell her from me that she is going to do a cruel, *wicked* thing, which will make papa miserable for the rest of his life, and, I believe, will break poor mamma’s heart.”

Laura took this letter (it was a very long one) away to her own room, and when I saw her again, her eyes were red, and she looked white and shaken. Not shaken in her resolve,—*that* never faltered.

During these last few days, the Dayrells did not intrude much upon us. Mr. Dayrell was evidently on the watch; we could see him from our windows lounging along the Parade, sometimes with his mother, but generally alone. If we went out even for half-an-hour’s shopping, he was sure to appear round the corner in the most mysterious manner, popping up when we least expected him, always unexceptionably dressed, with his golden curls, and beautiful,

fair, expressionless face, almost like a girl dressed up. He talked very little, but occupied his time in gazing at me, in a manner which he, no doubt, thought irresistible, but which annoyed me beyond measure.

Perhaps you may think these feelings unnatural in a girl of not quite eighteen towards a handsome young man of five or six and twenty; but I mean here to record my firm conviction that no ordinarily sensible girl over seventeen ever yet fell in love with a man *solely* and *wholly* on account of his good looks. It is one of those points in which the female sex is superior to the male; for every one knows that a girl who has a pretty face may be as outrageously silly as she chooses, she will find plenty of men to run after her.

Women fall in love for various and, sometimes, most extraordinary reasons: because a man is celebrated, because he is, for some cause or other, *the fashion*; because they imagine him to be unusually brave, or unusually clever, or (most often of all) because

he treats *them* with marked indifference, and so piques their self-love; but, I believe, *never* simply because of a fair exterior.

I do not suppose that Mark Antony was anything but a stalwart, rough, straightforward soldier; or that Ulysses had anything to recommend him personally except a certain free, virtuous independence of character; yet these men found two lovely and powerful queens ready to live, aye, and to *die* for them. And what women have been, they are, and will be, to the end of time.

So I cared not at all for Reginald Dayrell's company, though I admired him exceedingly, and was always comparing him, in my own mind, to some young god or hero of ancient history, in the romantic way common to girls in general.

So the days fled, till there came a certain bright, sunshiny morning when Laura came into the drawing-room about ten o'clock, dressed in a simple black dress, not like a nun's, and only remarkable for its plainness and absence of any ornament, save an ivory

cross hanging from her waist. She kissed me coldly and kindly—just the sort of kiss I had always been used to receive from her; then she crossed the room to where my aunt lay on the sofa, and I quietly left the room.

Half-an-hour after, I returned, and found Aunt Edith lying so still and white, that I feared she had fainted. But in a few minutes she looked up, and said, with a sweet smile,—

“Kiss me, Florence, you are my only home daughter now.”

“Don’t look so miserable, dear aunt,” I said, throwing my arms round her. “This is not a Roman Catholic convent; you will be able to see Laura sometimes; and, who knows? some day she may come back. There are no irrevocable vows to bind her.”

“She will never come back, dear,” was the gentle answer; and in her white, despairing face I thought I saw evidence that Laura had in that last moment betrayed the secret wound which was driving her to leave the

sunny outer world for the dim seclusion of a convent.

But Aunt Edith never told me this, only each day now she seemed to lose strength more rapidly, though her sweet patience and tranquillity never varied. No one would have told what a breaking heart was hidden beneath that calm, dignified (to strangers), almost formal manner.

“Like ships that have gone down at sea,
When Heaven was all tranquillity.”

Poor Uncle John's grief and annoyance were more boisterous, and, therefore, less deep; but he was certainly very unhappy, and turned again for refuge to his Roman Emperors, who had been neglected during the first happy days of our stay at Brighton.

The day after Laura's departure, I went down to the sea after our afternoon tea, and occupied a pleasant hour in scribbling a long letter to Dorothy Moreton, written with a pencil on a scrap of paper, with a piece of slate as a desk. Suddenly I heard a crunching of heavy feet on the shingle, and, glancing

up, I saw Mr. Dayrell leaning on a cane, in a melancholy, romantic attitude, gazing into my face.

If I had followed my natural inclination, I should have exclaimed, viciously, "Am I *never* to have a moment's peace?" but, being an ordinary nineteenth-century young lady, with unexceptional manners, I only said, mildly,—

"How do you do? What a lovely afternoon."

"Is it not? I have been here a long time. What do you suppose I have been doing, Miss Hatherleigh?"

"I can't guess; throwing stones into the sea?"

"No, a much more agreeable occupation than that. I have been taking a sketch of you."

"No, really; how *could* you manage to do that?"

"Very easily. You were too much absorbed to notice me, so I sat quietly down yonder, and drew you just as you were, sitting there."

“Pray let me see it.”

He handed me a tiny scrap of paper, evidently the fly-leaf of a pocket-book, on which was depicted a dejected-looking young female, with a very long nose and unnaturally black eye-lashes.

“What do you think of it?” he said, eagerly.

“Well,” I said, laughing, I can only reply as a friend of mine did when shown her own photograph: “I knew I was very ugly, but I did not think I was quite as ugly as that.”

Poor fellow, his face fell considerably, and, to turn the conversation, I remarked,—

“I am glad we have such a lovely evening; it is our last in dear old Brighton.”

“You are going away?”

I would not look up to see the expression of dismay which I knew was clouding his face, and I replied, with lowered eyes,—

“Yes; we go to-morrow.”

Silence for a few minutes,—dead silence; nothing to be heard but the gentle ishsuish of the tide, as it retreated rapidly from the shingly bank. I felt getting nervous

under the tender gaze of the eyes that were looking so earnestly into my face, and I rose to go. He stepped forward quickly, crunching the stones under his nervous tread.

“Don’t go just yet, Miss Hatherleigh. I—I—have something I wish to say to you.”

I stopped short, and looked down, with a terrible inward presentiment of what was coming. He spoke nervously, but without any hesitation.

“You would think it presumptuous, Miss Hatherleigh, if, after only three weeks’ acquaintance, I was to tell you all that is in my heart. But you cannot fail to have seen that I admire you, that I—Oh! Miss Hatherleigh, it is of no use to try and measure my words—let me say that I love you as you never have been loved, as you never will be loved again; and that all my hope of happiness lies in the thought that some day you may be my wife.”

I glanced quickly up into his face. He looked strangely young, and handsome, and

boyish as he stood there, the light from the setting sun falling with subdued radiance on his fair, perfect features and waved golden hair. There was the light of an earnest purpose in his blue eyes; and, though I had little respect for the love of a man of twenty-five after three weeks' acquaintance, I could not but answer gently,—

“You are deceiving yourself, Mr. Dayrell. You admire me, perhaps, and fancy that you love me; but you will know better some day. If I thought that your happiness for life depended on my answer, I should feel more regret than I do in asking you never to mention this subject again.”

“I know I have been premature,” he said, eagerly. “I did not expect a favourable answer at once. I only ask for time, for hope,—time to win your love, and just one grain of hope that some day I may be loved in return.”

An inward shudder passed through me as I thought of Sir Edgar and the last time I had listened to language much resembling this. I determined to take no half-measures

this time. So I said decidedly, in a matter-of-fact tone, which I hoped would tend to repress all romance,—

“We shall always, I hope, be good friends, Mr. Dayrell (if we ever meet again, that is to say, which is not likely), but we shall never be more than that. It is getting late. Good evening.”

“It is very easy for you to take leave in that heartless, cold way,” he answered, bitterly; “but you are wrong in what you have just said. You might have spoken a little more kindly, I think, now—just as we are going to part, but

“‘You may break, you may shatter the vase as you will,
The scent of the roses will *stick to it* still.’”

I was hard-hearted enough to remain unmoved by this touching rendering of Moore's lines; indeed, I could not prevent a smile as I replied,—

“Men always long most for what they cannot get. If I had accepted you, you would have been half ready to regret your bargain by this time. I *must* go, Mr.

Dayrell. Good-night, and—good-bye. We are off very early to-morrow.”

“Is there *no* hope?” he said, taking my hand, and holding it in a close, earnest grasp, as if to *wring* a favourable answer from me.

“None, none at all. Let me go, Mr. Dayrell, that boatman is looking at us.”

And in this unromantic fashion we parted. My last glimpse of him was standing with his hat off, his fair curls blown back by the wind, and a white despair disfiguring his handsome face.

We never met again; and I walked quickly home, feeling more sad and depressed than I had done for many days, only most thankful that not for one moment had I felt any temptation to prove unfaithful to my first, my only love, Arthur Moreton. True, that *he* was in a land that was “very far off,” in a burning, unhealthy climate, surrounded by dangers of which I knew little, but could imagine much. True, that it was most unlikely that we should ever meet again, or if we *did* meet, that he

would regard me in any other light than that of an early friend, in whom he had been disappointed and deceived. None the less for all this did I recognize the truth in Lord Surrey's beautiful lines:—

“Let no one to more love pretend
Than he has hearts in store ;
True love begun shall never end ;
Love once, and *love no more.*”

Next day we returned to Dalehurst; and here I will close the record of my early girlhood.

CHAPTER XVI.

DIARY RESUMED.

Sweet are the uses of adversity.

As You Like It.

JANUARY 18TH, 1873.—Ladyscourt. Come out, my dear old Diary,—out of the dust and rubbish of the drawer, where you have lain so many years unnoticed. It is more than ten years since I have looked upon you ; but what a crowd of associations rush on my mind at the sight of your worn, old purple morocco cover, and your tinted, blotted leaves, covered with girlish hieroglyphics, fearful and wonderful to behold !

Well, on the whole my feelings are those of almost unmixed thankfulness, as I read the experiences recorded here.

When I wrote those last few words at Dalehurst, I was a girl of seventeen, already

weary of life, lonely, disappointed, well nigh despairing. I resume the pen a woman of nearly eight-and-twenty, still unmarried, so with no very noticeable lights and shadows in my life, but, on the whole, tolerably contented, calm, and happy.

Let me take up the thread of my tale, and relate briefly the events of the last ten years.

Very soon after our visit to Brighton, Aunt Edith died. No doubt she had a fatal disease, but I shall always think that Laura's becoming a nun broke her heart, and hastened her end.

Uncle John lived on with me at Dalehurst till the month after I came of age,—a calm, solitary existence for us both, only enlivened for me by the friendship of Dorothy Moreton, and the conviction that I was a real comfort to the old man. Then he died too, a peaceful, painless death, without even the illness of an hour. I found him sitting in his study-chair one bright October morning, his head leaning on his hand, in the old, familiar attitude,—his expression that of a

most perfect satisfaction and peace. He had been dead some hours. The doctor said that "the lamp of life had gone out without suffering."

Poor old man! I am glad that I was a comfort to him in his last days. He often told me that I was more than a daughter to him; and I do not think that he would have lived as long as he did if he had been quite alone.

Then I came to live at Ladyscourt, and my old friend, Mr. Penrhyn, dying about that time, his widow came to live with me, and has acted as my chaperone and companion ever since. She is a gentle, elderly woman, with grey hair, and a very quiet, retiring manner. She is a perfect lady, and never interferes with me in any way. We each pursue our own routine of life, and are each very contented in our own way. She is generally absorbed in a most voluminous correspondence (though who she writes to, I cannot imagine) and in a most intricate piece of needlework, which seems to afford her a good deal of interest and

pleasure, though I am sick of the sight of it.

As for myself, I lead a very busy life. Many improvements have taken place in the village. I am constantly building, pulling down, and altering—not always, I fear, judiciously, but always with a view to the increased comfort and respectability of my tenants. I have never felt much desire to mix in the world, and go about as other girls of my age and position expect to do. My early days were clouded with many sorrows, so, earlier in life than most women, I learnt to look upon *peace*, and not excitement, as the *summum bonum* of human existence.

But I must continue my retrospect. Adelaide lives and flourishes. A bright, happy matron and mother is she, though she has had many sorrows. Three of her children died in infancy; one only remains, a golden-haired little girl, of five years old. She is a great pet of mine, and often comes to Ladyscourt, and races about the old hall and galleries like I used in old times, a solitary but happy child.

Laura still lives in her convent, and is, I am told, one of the most hard-working and self-denying of the Sisters. I shall never think she was right to leave her home and her parents as she did, just when she was most wanted; but *now* I am convinced no other life would suit her. She is happy and respected where she is, and we see her occasionally, not very often, for all her hopes and affections seem now centred in the narrow circle in which she moves. She is very fond of her little niece Bertha; but Adelaide will not allow her to go much to the convent, fearing that undue influence may be exercised over her by the nuns. I must say I think she is wise.

Only last year I lost my first best friend, Dorothy Moreton. She never fully recovered her spirits or her health after the loss of her brother, but she lived on, useful and beloved, till an unusually severe winter developed the seeds of consumption, so often dormant in persons affected with spinal complaints, and in less than six weeks

she was dead. I knew she was ill, but I had no idea she was so near death; *had* I known it, I should have been with her. But Dorothy had always held the opinion, so beautifully expressed by one of our poets (I forget which), who beseeches a dear friend to

“Say not good-night, but in some happier clime
Bid me good-morning.”

So my last memory of her is not as one pale, emaciated, *dying*, but in the full bloom of all the health she was ever permitted to enjoy,—her soft eyes radiant, her beautiful face, turned towards me with a bright, welcoming smile, as I saw her on my last visit to Dalehurst. Methinks with just such a look and smile she will greet me when I enter the Heavenly City. But I cannot write more on that subject even now.

Rose and Eleanor are, of course, grown up, and are pleasant, nice-looking girls, and a great help and comfort to their father, who is growing very old and feeble.

Of Arthur Moreton I hear very seldom. Occasionally, in a letter to me, Rose mentions him, and I grieve to say the last report was unfavourable. He has had fever, and is much debilitated in consequence. The climate of that low, damp, marshy country in which his lot is cast, is beginning to tell even on his iron constitution. Still I hear no mention of his coming home. It is some weeks since Rose wrote. I must pay another visit to Dalehurst soon, and find out all particulars.

JANUARY 20TH.—This writing in my old Diary has awakened many old thoughts and feelings that I thought dead for ever. This morning I deliberately sat down before my looking-glass, and surveyed my own countenance with attention. I am not so *very* much altered, after all, though I have got into the habit of thinking my days as a “beauty” are past and gone. My forehead is still fair and smooth, though the lower part of my face is much tanned by constant exposure to winds and weather. My eyes and hair are the same, but I think

my expression is changed; it is less bright, more thoughtful and gentle.

It would be strange indeed if the many trials I have passed through had not done something to mellow and soften my naturally proud, impetuous temper. Had I been told at seventeen that I should have been living here, unmarried, with only one old lady as a companion, when I was twenty-seven, I should have been ready to cast myself into the sea in impatient disgust at so forlorn and dismal a fate. Yet here I am, actually alive, and much more peaceful and happy than I was then.

At this stage of my meditations, Bridget came in, and I told her something of what had been passing in my mind. The dear, old thing (Irish and impetuous as ever) kissed me affectionately, and vowed I was "Just the same, only a deal handsomer and better!" Good, faithful soul, what a comfort she has been to me! Yes, I have many comforts, and should, I think, become very happy, and settle down to a contented middle age, if only—well, the thought will

out, and my dear old Diary betrays no secrets—if only I could see Arthur Moreton once more.

JANUARY 22ND.—A bright frosty day. I wrote yesterday to propose myself for a two days' visit to the Moretons; and this morning I arrived, after receiving a telegram from Rose, saying, "Pray come at once." A strange proceeding on her part; but it was soon explained.

I thought there was an unusual air about the peaceful little Rectory altogether as I drove up the well-known gravel walk. The hall door stood widely open, and dear old Mr. Moreton was parading up and down outside, as if watching anxiously for my arrival. Eleanor also came forward to meet me, a pink glow of excitement on her fair cheek, which made her look very like Dorothy.

She said very little, but took my hand, and led me into the drawing-room. There, stretched on the old familiar sofa, lay a well-remembered form; but, oh, how altered! But who that had ever known Arthur

Moreton could mistake that noble brow, those clear hazel eyes, and the resolute mouth, pale and emaciated as all the features were? He rose as I came in, and held out his hand in the old friendly way, though his mouth was working with nervous excitement. And I—I, who had imagined myself transformed into a calm, well-controlled character, incapable of giving way to any violent emotion whatsoever, I just threw myself down on the low chair by the sofa where I had so often sat in old times, buried my face in my hands, and burst into tears, sobbing all the more violently and helplessly because I *knew* that I was betraying myself.

Suddenly I became conscious that the others had left the room, and that he and I were all alone. Then a hand was laid on my shoulder, and a voice said, in low, loving tones, broken and weak with emotion,—

“I have waited for you so long, my darling, will you not reward me at last?”

In two months we were married.

CHAPTER XVII.

REST AT LAST.

“Some feelings are to mortals given
With less of earth in them than heaven.”

SCOTT.

FOUR years have passed away since I last wrote in my Diary—four years of almost unmixed happiness to me.

Over and over again I have made Arthur tell me the various causes which led at last to our union—an event which once appeared so impossible. He says that during the first year of his experience in Africa, his opinions about married clergymen underwent a great change. He saw so many devoted, loving, hard-working wives around him, — women who upheld and cheered their husbands' sinking spirits, and aided instead of hindering

them in every good work,—women delicately nurtured, who gladly underwent trials at sight of which strong men quailed,—that he actually became convinced that it was the *duty* of a missionary, at any rate, to try and find a help-mate who should be like-minded with himself, and use her gentle woman's tact and tender-heartedness in the endeavour to humanize and refine the savage people around him.

In general with Arthur Moreton, to recognize a duty was but the first step towards performing it; but in this matter he failed. He says that among the few English ladies in that country, he occasionally met one during that ten years who might have well fulfilled the conditions of which he was in search; but ever between him and them rose a never-forgotten face, last seen in the garden at Dalehurst; and his truthful spirit recoiled from the idea of offering his hand where he could not give his whole heart.

Then there were Dorothy's letters, first telling him that I had bravely resolved to

break off my engagement with Sir Edgar, and risk the displeasure and contempt of all my friends, not, as he had imagined, from caprice, but because I could not bear to continue the course I had marked out for myself after hearing of *his* love for me.

Dorothy had waited till he left home before she did me justice in this particular, knowing that it would have made no difference in his views *then*, and dreading to add another pang to his sorrow in leaving England.

She had told him all,—the fearful danger to life and health to which the rupture of my engagement had exposed me,—my subsequent refusal of Mr. Dayrell's offer,—the sad, lonely life I had led for three years with my uncle, and my final settling at Ladyscourt, renouncing all the pleasures of youth for a quiet, solitary, but not altogether useless existence.

Then, Arthur tells me, he resolved, if he ever saw England again, that he would ask me to become his wife; but the years went by, and he could not persuade himself

that it was his duty to leave the mission, where earnest labourers were so much needed.

But there came a time when severe illness rendered his duty clear and unmistakable. The doctors told him that his life was not worth a week's purchase if he stayed in that fever-haunted country, and so he came home.

In the first warmth of the revival of old home-love and influence, the reserve of his nature gave way, and he confided his hopes to his father. Hence Rose's earnestly-worded telegram.

I need not add much more to this record. Enough to say that we have only had one sorrow during these four happy years, in Laura's death. She died of typhus fever, caught during her ministrations among the poor people in her neighbourhood during a severe visitation of that awful disease. The other sisters were kind and charitable, but none worked so hardly or so lovingly as she, my once cold-hearted and selfish cousin.

Poor Laura! the storm-tossed ship has found rest at last. Surely, as far as it is permitted to mortals to do, she amply redeemed the errors of her early youth, and deserved the peaceful death that came gently to her in her sleep.

Mr. Dayrell is married. I saw the announcement in the *Times* of yesterday. I trust he may be happy,—he has all my good wishes.

To this faithful little book I may confide the secret that I have once seen Eugénie. I was passing with my husband through Paris a year ago, and in one of the smaller thoroughfares I caught sight of the well-remembered sallow face, with its small, keen, black eyes. She saw me, too, and I noticed that all the little colour she possesses forsook her cheeks and lips, and she looked as if about to faint. In very pity, I quickly averted my eyes. Poor soul! she need not have feared me: I did not even mention to Arthur that I had seen her. My one desire is to forget all that miserable time, but I do not

know what he might have thought it his duty to do.

One word as to our own home happiness. Need I say that Arthur is the kindest and best of husbands, and that I am the happiest and best cared-for of England's many happy wives? We have three children, two boys, dark, handsome, rosy darlings, and now one dear, fair little girl.

Old Mr. Allen, who had been rector of this parish ever since I was a child, is dead at last, and Arthur has the living. He could not have borne to be idle, and this light country parish work just suits him, for he will never be the vigorous, healthy man he was before his work in Africa. But he is very well now always, by dint of avoiding cold and over-work.

Arthur has just come in from the garden, and, seeing me at my writing-table, he came and took up this Diary, looking over the early entries with a grave, sad smile. Then he turned round, and lifting our little Mary from the ground, where she had been

rolling in her merry play, said, while his hand nestled among her golden curls,—“It is well that we have two sons, my Florence. You would not wish your daughter to be ‘A Little Heiress.’ ”

THE END.

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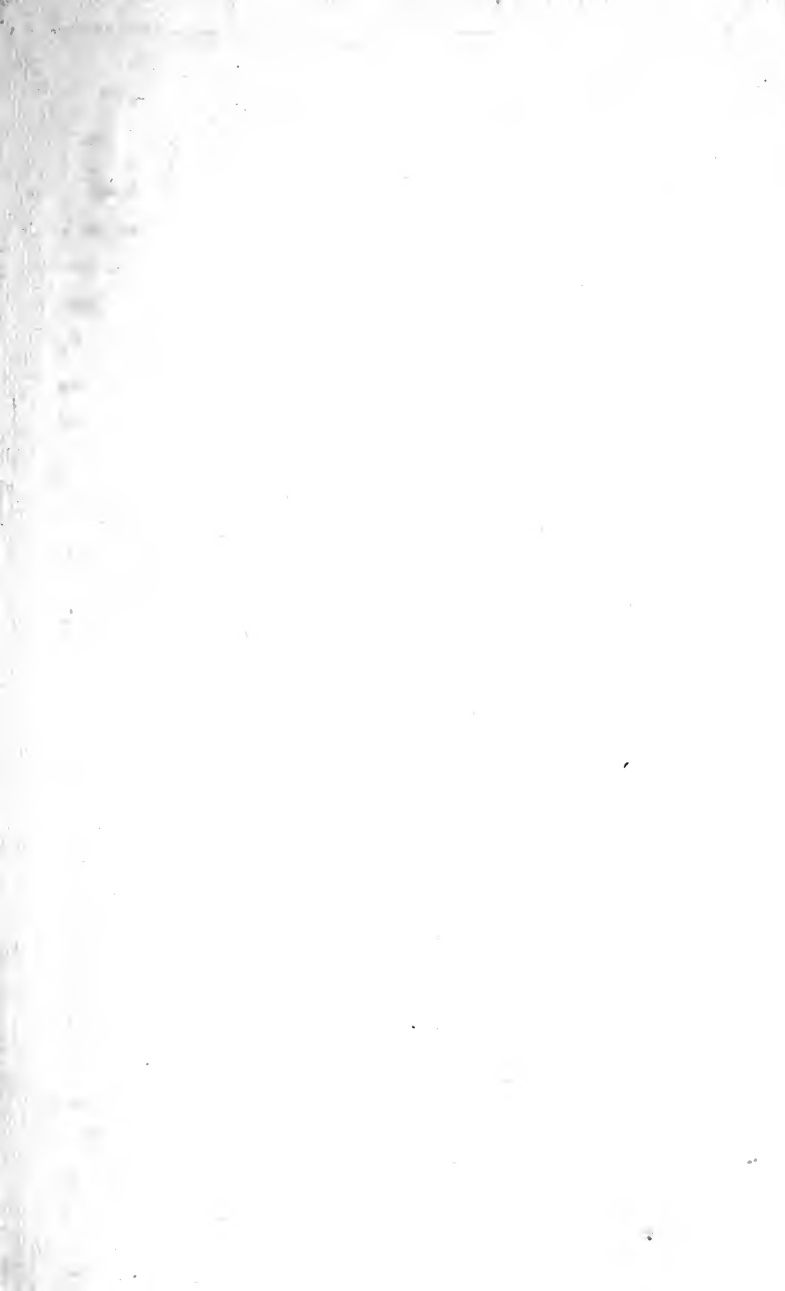
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